BLACK OPS II MULTIPLAYER: SHOCKING FIRST DETAILS REVEALED



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Jump in.

Times are changing. For what seems like an age, there have been rumblings of a next-generation machine that will reinvigorate the industry and deliver the next step that gamers are pleading for. Barely an internet story or magazine cover has been published without some form of nod towards a Microsoft or Sony console that, in reality, has always been further away than everyone thought. Really, many are thinking far too narrowly about what's next. While I'm sure there's an 'Xbox 720' just around the corner, the future of gaming is a much broader fight, with a far more interesting outcome, than simply who's going to have the finer graphics and exclusives.

Take our cover feature, for example. Here we have a machine funded by the people that's offering nothing more than basic, accessible – and, in many cases, crude – gaming experiences. These are the same gaming experiences that keep the majority of us, young and old, glued to our phones for hours every day. I played *Whale Trail* for three solid hours last weekend while *Lollipop Chainsaw* sat on my unplayed pile, craving attention. And it's certainly not just me; I can barely go ten minutes without a *SongPop* notification nudging me to guess at more modern rap (my musical weakness). Sure, the next gen is close. It may not be what many are expecting, though...

Rick Porter
EDITOR IN CHIEF




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FAVOURITES

(TREYARCH BREAKS COVER)

Black Ops II multiplayer dares to be different

→ As Call Of Duty gets set for its annual return, **games™** reveals the shocking first details behind Black Ops II's multiplayer and how Treyarch is daring to change the blueprint that millions have already embraced

Multiplayer is the true focus for any *Call Of Duty* game in the modern era, its audience desperate for any snippet of information even before it realises there's also a single-player campaign to delve into. With Activision finally biting the bullet, opening up the door for **games™** to spend hours experiencing it, the question of whether this could be the best in the series yet is looking immediately promising. To its credit, Treyarch has approached the sequel with a renewed enthusiasm, redesigning fundamental gameplay features and introducing a swath of new weapons, kill streaks and user-generated content to potentially unleash one of the more surprising and unexpected twists to the formula yet.

UNLIKE THE SINGLE-PLAYER campaign, *Black Ops II*'s multiplayer takes place exclusively in the year 2025. Treyarch has gone to town with this setting when it comes to its online world, embracing advanced military technology and imagining a near-future world populated with flying sentry guns, ravaged by war and underscored by an intense soundtrack courtesy of Trent Reznor. The studio has been galvanised by the sci-fi possibilities, enabling it to take a fresh look at the series and add in some of the most drastic changes to both the gameplay and the system since Infinity Ward's *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*.

This begins with *Black Ops II*'s create-a-class. Clearly inspired by board games, each piece of your loadout is now displayed in pictures and spread across your customisation screen in copious detail. Here you can mix and match ten items from every category, which in turn gives unprecedented freedom for players to tweak their setup to their precise play style. This enables more weapon combinations than ever before and introduces an intriguing twist in the new wildcard system. Also like a board game, wildcards can be used as a substitute for another item. For instance, if you'd rather focus on fast-paced perks, you can drop your primary weapon and use a wildcard that enables you to pick two perks from the same category. Each wildcard takes one of your ten slots in addition to its bonus, so you'll have to decide whether it's worth the sacrifice. It'll also cause much distress to some players to learn that Treyarch has also removed all Pro perks to support such sweeping changes.

NATURALLY, NO MATTER how innovative and original the developer is with regard to multiplayer, it'll be the maps where a lot of players will form their opinions. Four of the maps that will ship with *Black Ops II* in November have currently been outed, the first of which was Aftermath, set within the ruins of a decimated Los Angeles.

It's a mid-sized stage with plenty of variety in terms of routes for players to discover. The interior segments lead to high vantage points and low routes that emerge through the sub-level of battered buildings. The exterior is quite varied, with large streets to the sides and a busy central route that cuts through a dilapidated office block. All in all, it's a rather safe map design that wouldn't feel out of place in *Modern Warfare 3*.

Next we blasted through Cargo, another mid-sized map that boasts a steadier balance

Above *Black Ops II* will feature a soundtrack by former Nine Inch Nails frontman and *Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* composer Trent Reznor.

(SCORE STREAKS)

→ Treyarch's biggest change could be its smartest

■ SIMILAR TO HOW the Assault strike package functioned in last year's *Call Of Duty*, score streaks both reward players for killing enemies and award points for assisting allies and performing actions that benefit the team.

We're shown a great example during a standard match of capture the flag: the player is running across the map and nabs the enemy flag for 100 points, then en route back to base kills the enemy flag carrier for 200 points. Here, because the enemy was a high-value target, the player is awarded double the points. Finally, returning the flag to base, he receives another 150 points and unlocks two score streaks in the process. The system appears exceptionally balanced as it gives newcomers a stronger foothold on the *Call Of Duty* template while rewarding veteran players tremendously for skill, patience and method.



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THE COMPLETE SCORE STREAK LIST

- RC-XD 325 Points
- UAV 375 Points
- HUNTER KILLER 400 Points
- CARE PACKAGE 450 Points
- COUNTER-UAV 475 Points
- GUARDIAN 500 Points
- HELLSTORM MISSILE 525 Points
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- EMP SYSTEMS 1,050 Points
- LODESTAR 1,150 Points
- UTOC WARSHIP 1,200 Points
- K9 UNIT 1,275 Points
- SWARM 1,400 Points

Below *Call Of Duty*'s new class system enables an unprecedented level of player customisation within the gameplay.

→ SEGA HAS TRADEMARKED SHINING ARK, WHICH IS HOPEFULLY A REMAKE OF 1997'S SHINING THE HOLY ARK

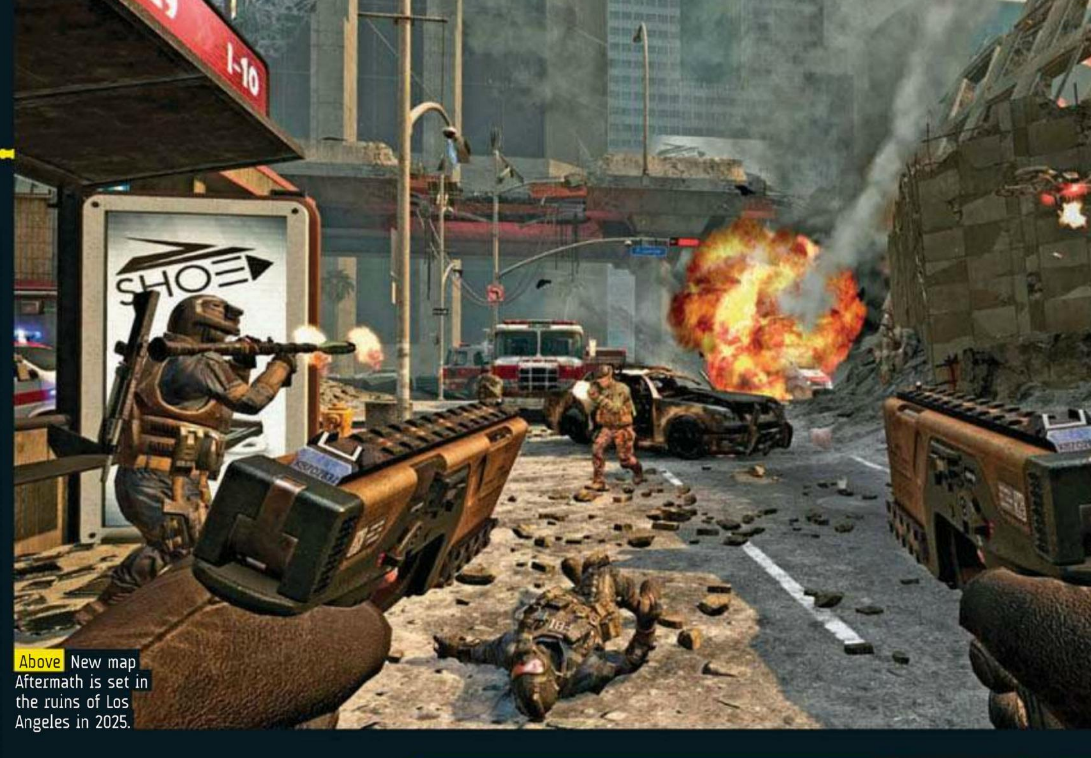


between interior and exterior, and a central hub styled as a large circular arena. It's not too dissimilar to *Modern Warfare*'s Countdown map, and there's almost a *Gears Of War* inspiration in the environment as cranes move large crates across the setting. Fast players will make the most of this stage with its multiple tunnels and narrow walkways, while snipers most likely head to higher ground, creating a somewhat treacherous atmosphere that could discourage gung-ho play.

With another match out of the way, it was on to Yemen, a map that seemed a little more varied than what else was on offer. Seemingly benefiting shotgun runners, its close-quarters corridors and tight urban alleyways are interspersed with an abundance of ledges for agile players to leap across and pounce on unsuspecting opponents.

Finally there was Turbine, a large-scale map that has some striking similarities to *Modern Warfare 2*'s Afghan. With a dustland backdrop featuring – surprise, surprise – large wind turbines on the periphery and a downed aircraft laying in the centre of the map, this is a stage perfect for large, team-oriented objective modes. There are two interior elements at play as well, and a mounted rifle perched on a ledge that'll tear through enemies instantly, topped off with the slightly strange gimmick that it is possible to climb on anything and everything in the map.

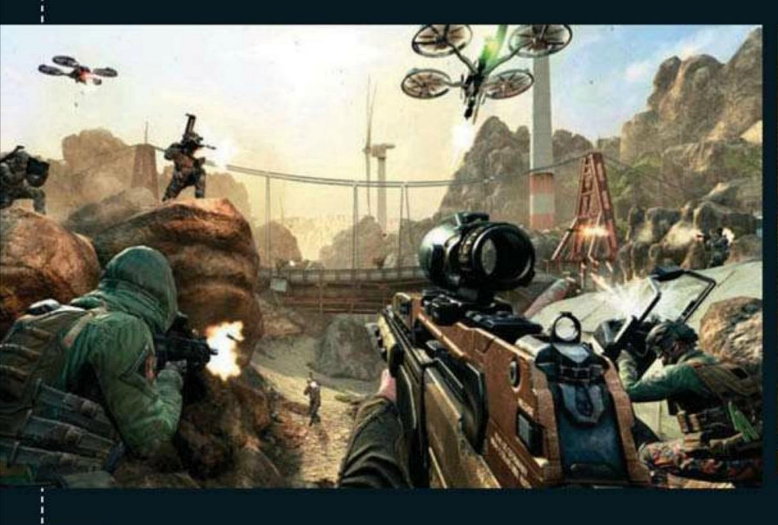
If some of the changes that Treyarch had already made weren't controversial enough, the eradication of kill streaks is surely enough to push even the most casual fan over the edge. Replaced by what are now known as score streaks, they work in much the same way as the Assault strike package in *Modern Warfare 3*: performing actions and supporting your team will reward the player with points that contribute to powerful weapon streaks. The idea is to try to stop the *Call Of Duty* mentality of 'every soldier for himself' that continually makes its way out of the deathmatch arena into any mode that's on offer. The knowledge that working as a cohesive unit rather than a floating gun intent on killing anything that moves could shift the balance of each match entirely.



Above New map Aftermath is set in the ruins of Los Angeles in 2025.

IN WHAT HAS almost become a complete overhaul of the entire foundations, even the finer details have been through the grinder over the last two years. Post-match accolades have been turned into medals that now actively reward players with XP in much the same way as challenges. The dangling carrot, so to speak, is that unlike challenges, they're completely repeatable. Following this trend is Treyarch's decision to dispense with *COD* Points and change the process of levelling up slightly so that content is gated by ranks: players will be rewarded with one unlock per level, as the studio found that players unlocked most of the higher-end content too early in *Black Ops*. This means weapon attachments such as the new millimetre scanner – which sends a small pulse wave around the environment to spot stationary players behind walls and concealed in smoke – or the target finder that can identify enemies within view so they can quickly be targeted and destroyed now have to be earned rather than handed to the more hardcore audience on a plate. Accessibility to all levels of player

> "A complete overhaul of the entire foundations. Even the finer details have been through the grinder in the past two years"




Above The large open area of Turbine is intended for lots of players at once and will be perfect for team-versus-team matches.


ROD FERGUSSON HAS LEFT EPIC GAMES TO JOIN THE BIOSHOCK INFINITE TEAM AT IRRATIONAL GAMES



(THE SPOILS OF WAR)

→ The rewards of a score streak

■ While there are plenty of varied score streaks in *Black Ops II*, it's worth pointing out the most ingenious.

First off is the MQ-27, which can be deployed above the battlefield and controlled manually or left to its own devices to rain down terror. Although it feels a little unwieldy at first, this little helicopter can cause a massive amount of damage and cover a huge distance. The Hellstorm missile, meanwhile, is likely to be a divisive new entry. It can either be manually guided to a target for a sizeable impact or detonated in the air to release a cluster of bombs. The AGR has been showcased in early footage, but this drone is a force to be reckoned with on the front line. "It's not bullshit – this thing is a complete beast," says an excited David Vonderhaar, game design director on *Black Ops II*.

There's also the Guardian, which emits a suppressive sonic wave that shocks opponents. Then you'll have the Lightning Strike, which enables players to choose three precise target areas to bombard with an aerial assault, and the highest value streak, Swarm, which sends out a devastating attack that wipes out enemies and destroys their equipment across the entire map.



Above Activision wants to encourage *Call Of Duty* play on a professional level and is building in features the community expects.

is a problem that *COD* has always had, bizarre additions over the years such as death streaks proving there's certainly no quick fix. Small improvements to other equipment in the game, however, such as the ability to deploy an assault shield to create mobile cover on the fly, are all aiming to counter this.

Outside of this, Treyarch has embraced many of the steps forward you always imagined it would when it comes to online multiplayer. Game modes are no longer restricted to two teams, as *Black Ops II* will feature 'Multi-Team', which will support a maximum of six squads facing off against one another for more than the usual two-way combat. Naturally, this should develop over time, but its initial showing does hint at a level of difficulty in trying to distinguish between the teams on the actual battlefield. Encounter a group of enemies and you'll be hard pressed to work out a specific unit unless they're actively firing at one another.

ACCEPTING VIDEOGAMES AS a sport has been an ongoing battle for many supporters, so the fact that the biggest franchise in the world wants to get on board can only be good for business. A big focus for *Black Ops II* is making the game into a competitive sport. Participants can now enter League Play, where they will be sorted into a division based on their skill level and given the chance to climb into higher brackets, with the promise of spotlighted events and rewards at some juncture. In order to make the idea more of a spectacle, Treyarch has also introduced 'CODcast', which opens the door for individuals to become specialised spectators, providing commentary for any match either live or previously played. There are options for picture-in-picture, map view and other display options where the aim is to immerse the player deeper into the game with a clearer perspective on the action. Just to ensure that everyone can take part, Activision is also developing a new live game streaming feature that will enable players to watch matches from their computer or mobile device. No platforms have been confirmed, but it was shown running on an iPad, supported by the claim that you can watch any game, anywhere.

To say that Treyarch is trying something different with multiplayer in this year's *Call Of Duty* would be a huge understatement. Not only has it seen fit to move away from many of the staple elements of the past, but its new introductions serve as a way to try to grow the phenomenon even bigger than it currently is, by finally locking down the player who struggles to stay hooked due to the seriously high standard of the competition. Either way, this is a bold move on behalf of the developer, toying with the biggest draw the franchise has to inject a much-needed shot of adrenaline into the formula. *Black Ops II* has a lot to do come November...

EXTRA CREDIT

> GAME



DAVID CRANE'S JUNGLE ADVENTURE

Currently about halfway through its funding phase on Kickstarter, *Jungle Adventure* is a proposed game from *Pitfall!* creator David Crane. The title is intended to use next-gen technology to create the most realistic jungle environment ever seen, in a game that mixes side-on platforming with over-the-shoulder exploration. It's intended for PC and Mac, with other platforms like Ouya, Linux and iOS possible with more funding. The campaign ends on 15 September, so head to **kickstarter.com** if you'd like to be involved.

> CONSOLE



NEO GEO X

If you remember the hulking Neo Geo console and its equally mammoth game cartridges from the early Nineties, the prospect of a handheld Neo Geo with built-in games is a dream come true. Out this December, the Neo Geo X costs £99, or £150 for the Gold variation complete with controller. It comes with 20 games, including the awesome *Metal Slug*, preloaded on the handheld. You can pre-order the console now at **neogeox.com**

> TOYS



LEGO MINECRAFT

Now available to buy directly from Lego, this limited edition set is a perfect marriage of videogame IP and real-world toy. And it's also a bit of a feelgood story. Conceived by fans, it garnered enough support through Lego's Kickstarter-like Cuusoo service to be taken from concept to prototype and to official product. It is the third such product to get through Lego's new service and the first to be based on a videogame. *Portal* may be next, having just gained enough support to be officially considered...



SONY HAS CONFIRMED GRAN TURISMO 6 IS CURRENTLY IN DEVELOPMENT BUT WON'T SAY WHEN TO EXPECT IT




A more dramatic example of how the Leap Motion models the entire hand.

(GOING HANDS-OFF)

The Next Kinect

→ **games™** travels to San Francisco to see Leap Motion, the new motion controller many are calling Kinect 2.0

The Leap Motion offices look as if they've just been unpacked from a crate. They occupy half a floor in a nondescript San Francisco office building, exposed wiring, white board, and other detritus associated with tech startups littering the room. Folding tables stand in for desks and the ceiling is a maze of open ducts. In the corner is a large slingshot and a pile of boxes – a live *Angry Birds* setup.

The humble state of the office – just one more tech startup in an area littered with them – belies Leap Motion's grandiose plans. Founders David Holtz and Michael Buckwald aren't just selling a product; they are selling what they hope is the future – an entirely new way to interact with personal computers. It's a hands-free motion device that offers accuracy up to a hundredth of a millimetre, and has attracted the attention of an incredible 30,000 developers.

Below The Leap Motion is small enough to fit in your pocket, and is expected to retail for around £45.

Holtz has been working on Leap Motion for six years. A diminutive man who speaks a mile a minute, Holtz is a consummate engineer who has worked on everything from laser radars to NASA missions. Leap Motion, he says, was conceived as a solution to the problems he was having with 3D modelling on the PC.

"I was very frustrated because I could draw something on a piece of paper in seconds, but when I wanted to model something on a computer, it took minutes or hours," he explains. "It wasn't because the computer wasn't fast enough, or because I didn't know what I wanted. It was because there was something between me and the computer that kept that exchange from occurring. I felt like it was the interface."

After conceiving this new interface, Holtz partnered with Buckwald, a childhood friend, and began seeking investors. Now, some six years later, the Leap Motion is nearly ready to go to market. The device itself is a tiny sensor that rests just behind the keyboard, small enough to pick up and put in your pocket. When active, it models all ten fingers of the hands, and allows users to interact with the desktop without touching the screen.

HOLTZ SEES IT as a kind of bridge between tablets and PCs. "There's a definite want for more," he says. "Fundamentally, people like using tablets more than computers. Not because tablets are better – mouse and keyboards are still really good. But tablets are easier and more direct to use... There's something really human about it. That doesn't really exist right now for the computer."

Holtz goes on to demonstrate a few of the device's practical applications on the PC, many of which come straight out of the world of tablets. He boots up *Fruit Ninja* and quickly annihilates a handful of vegetation with a few swipes of his fingers. He zooms in and out of a map of the →

> "There was something between me and the computer that kept that exchange from occurring. I felt like it was the interface"
>
> David Holtz, Leap Motion

DATA STREAM → ALLEGED IMAGES OF THE XBOX 720 DEV KIT SURFACE. LOOKS LIKE THE MATRIX

Leap Motion can detect the movement of multiple fingers

BEYOND KINECT

Leap Motion isn't the only hardware set to supersede Kinect, and Microsoft is surely working on its own follow-up. Here's what to expect from Kinect 2



There are potential uses outside of gaming too

KINECT WILL BE IN THE NEXT XBOX

■ IN JULY, IMAGES of a supposed development kit for the next Xbox, codenamed Durango, appeared online and were confirmed to be legitimate by a number of anonymous sources. No Kinect hardware was shown with the dev kit but a piece of software called NuiView, used to interpret Kinect data, is built into the kit. So expect some sort of Kinect to play a part in Microsoft's next console.

AI CHARACTERS WILL FINALLY LOOK YOU IN THE EYE

■ ANDREW OLIVER OF Blitz Games has been experimenting with next-gen motion sensors he declines to specifically name, but he gives us some practical examples of what the technology will be able to achieve. "You're going to increase the resolution and increase the speed," he says of the next wave of motion sensors. "What you get from that is facial skeletons and hand skeletons. So what would you do if you had hand skeletons? In our office one of the simple things we've done is that if you smile at the game, the character on screen will recognise that and smile back. It's a simple thing but it makes an instant impact. When you see a character respond to you the way a human would, it feels and looks alive, which is something videogame characters just don't do at the moment. When you truly interact with a character and they make eye contact with you, it brings it to another level. At the moment this is experimental stuff, but we've got some mini-games where you can play rock, paper, scissors with it. Now I wouldn't play that game with someone in the pub, but with a computer character it's really fun and engaging."

KINECT AND 3D PROJECTION MAY WORK TOGETHER

■ **GAMES™** ASKED *Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor* producer Tatsuya Kitabayashi what he expects from the next Kinect. "One is a higher resolution of the detection system. So at the moment, if you stick your hand out, it barely recognises each finger, but if it had a higher resolution and could detect every joint in one hand then we could do a lot more with it. At the moment it's just hand movements and grabbing and letting go. That's the best it can do. The other thing I'd like is, instead of waving at an empty space, it would be great if the actual 3D visuals were there in front of you like holograms, so you [would] actually interact with what you see."

YOU MAY EVEN PLAY GAMES WITH YOUR TONGUE

■ AT THE CASUAL Connect conference in July, Xbox founder Ed Fries interviewed Valve's Gabe Newell about the future, and Newell asserted that the era of touch screens, defined by the iPad and Windows 8, will be short-lived and that full-body motion control, including, bizarrely, the tongue, is a more realistic future. "One of the engineers actually did something with a… Okay, this is super-nerdy. You can come back and tease us about this years from now. But he did a tongue controller," said Newell. "When you look at all of the muscles in your body, if you think of them as SCSI or USB, it turns out that your tongue is a pretty good way of connecting a mechanical system to your brain. But it's really disconcerting to have the person you're sitting next to going, 'Arglearglargle. You just Googled me, didn't you?' I don't think tongue input is in our futures. But I do think you'll have bands on your wrists, and you'll be doing stuff with your hands. Your hands are incredibly expressive. If you look at somebody playing a guitar versus somebody playing a keyboard, there's a far greater amount of data that you can get through the information that people convey through their hands than we're currently using. Touch is… it's nice that it's mobile. It's lousy in terms of symbol rate."

Holtz demonstrates Leap Motion's amazing precision



A simple midair swipe and that fruit is gone


BLIZZARD HAS ADVISED BATTLE.NET USERS TO CHANGE THEIR PASSWORDS AFTER IT WAS HACKED


world using Google Maps, noting that he can tilt, zoom and rotate the map at the same time. In Microsoft Paint – the most humble of design programs – Holtz looks like he's fingerpainting as he draws a smiling face and writes 'Hi.'

It's not just a touch screen without the screen, though, which is the most obvious application when thinking about gaming. Consider first-person shooters, which are notoriously limited on tablets. Either developers put them on rails, or they resort to painfully awkward on-screen controls that mimic controllers. With Leap Motion, though, it will theoretically be possible to point and shoot in two directions at once. "Like a real action movie," Holtz says. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

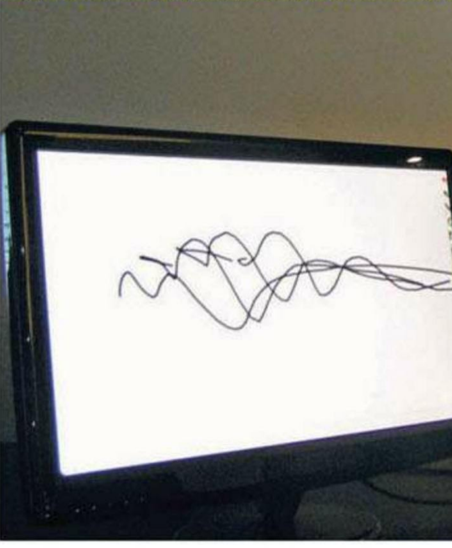
Both Holtz and Buckwald are dedicated gamers. Holtz is currently playing *Diablo III*, and frequently expresses a love of *Homeworld*, Relic's real-time strategy game that made revolutionary use of 3D space – one can easily imagine what a great fit a potential *Homeworld 3* would be for Leap Motion. Buckwald's work keeps him from playing as much as he would like to, but he still manages to find time for the occasional game of *StarCraft II*.

Both speak fluently about the potential impact their device may have on the medium. Of the 30,000 developers who have inquired about the technology, Buckwald says, about 15 per cent of them are interested in making games that take advantage of the device, including iOS developers and studios specialising in real-time strategy and first-person shooters.



Above Leap Motion founders Michael Buckwald and David Holtz.

HOLTZ SPEAKS ENTHUSIASTICALLY about one developer's idea for a *Jenga*-like game: "Like I'm playing *Jenga* with someone on the other side of the world and… it's crazy *Jenga*. It could go Jell-o and start wobbling, or it could be low gravity, or something completely crazy. Maybe I'm suddenly tiny and I have to pull out the jenga with both my arms."



Such ideas might not seem that revolutionary to gamers who have seen an avalanche of awful third-party motion-driven games for platforms like the Wii – including, yes, *Jenga* – but it's important to realise that Holtz and Buckwald see Leap Motion as more than a competitor for Microsoft's Kinect or Nintendo's Wii Remote.

Buckwald elaborates on some of the differences between Leap Motion and Microsoft's motion-driven Xbox 360 peripheral: "Kinect is a great device for playing games in the living room that require full-body tracking but not a lot of detail or accuracy. That's a big space and there have been a lot of games that have been built in that space. We're really focused on the things that require lots of detail, lots of accuracy. We're focused on situations where we need to track ten fingers, track within a hundredth of a millimetre accuracy, and let people hold things and grab things. So it's a very different vision."

(GAME CHANGER)

How Leap Motion could control your favourite games

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

In any hardcore raid instance, timing is of the essence. Players frequently bind several actions to a single key to ensure maximum efficiency. But what about binding several actions to just one finger while moving the character with the other hand? Deathwing wouldn't stand a chance.



CALL OF DUTY

Leap Motion has the potential to combine the best element of the Wii Remote's 'point and shoot' motion controls with the precision of the mouse and keyboard. There's also the pure joy that comes with independently wielding a pair of submachine guns.



BEJEWELED

Leap Motion wouldn't necessarily revolutionise *Bejeweled*'s interface – it's pretty simple to begin with – but it would nevertheless be a nice addition to puzzle games. The most interesting possibilities would likely be found in 3D puzzles that require two hands to manipulate. Devious designers would no doubt find all sorts of ways to exploit the new interface.



SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

Sins doesn't move as quickly as *StarCraft II* or *Company Of Heroes*, but it would be pure bliss to be able to zoom in and out of that galactic map with the movement of a couple of fingers. Really, there's so much to do in *Sins* at any given time that it would start to resemble the interfaces in *Minority Report*. But you'd sure look cool doing it.



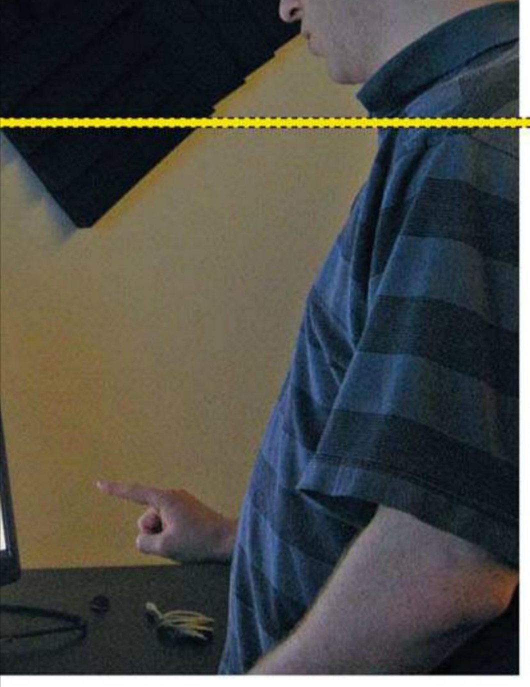
DIABLO III

At the very least, Leap Motion would have the potential to relieve the repetitive strain injuries from all that clicking on the mouse.





APPLICATION DEADLINE FOR THE SCEE-SUPPORTED MASTERS FOR GAMES DEVELOPERS, GAMER CAMP,





Abo Leap Motion makes using MS Paint like fingerpainting.



Above Minority Report-like tech may not be that far away after all.

AND, OF COURSE, Leap Motion's utility goes beyond just games. With Kinect, Microsoft is trying to build on what Nintendo started with the Wii Remote. Holtz and Buckwald are trying to replace the mouse – only the most ubiquitous and important computer peripheral of the past 30 years. For them, televisions are at the bottom of a very long list of home electronics that could someday see Leap Motion integration.

"At the moment, we're really not as interested in television, because it's not an area where we see a lot of nuanced interaction happening," Buckwald explains. "We're really focused on fundamentally transforming how people interact with a computer. For us, that means that it will soon be integrated into laptops, desktops, then mobile devices, tablets, smartphones, and then even things like cars."

As for whether Leap Motion will eventually be making its way into home consoles, Buckwald professes that the company is "excited" about the next generation of consoles, which is now fairly close at hand. For now, though, it's all theoretical. We'll have a better idea of Leap Motion's potential when it arrives on store shelves in February.

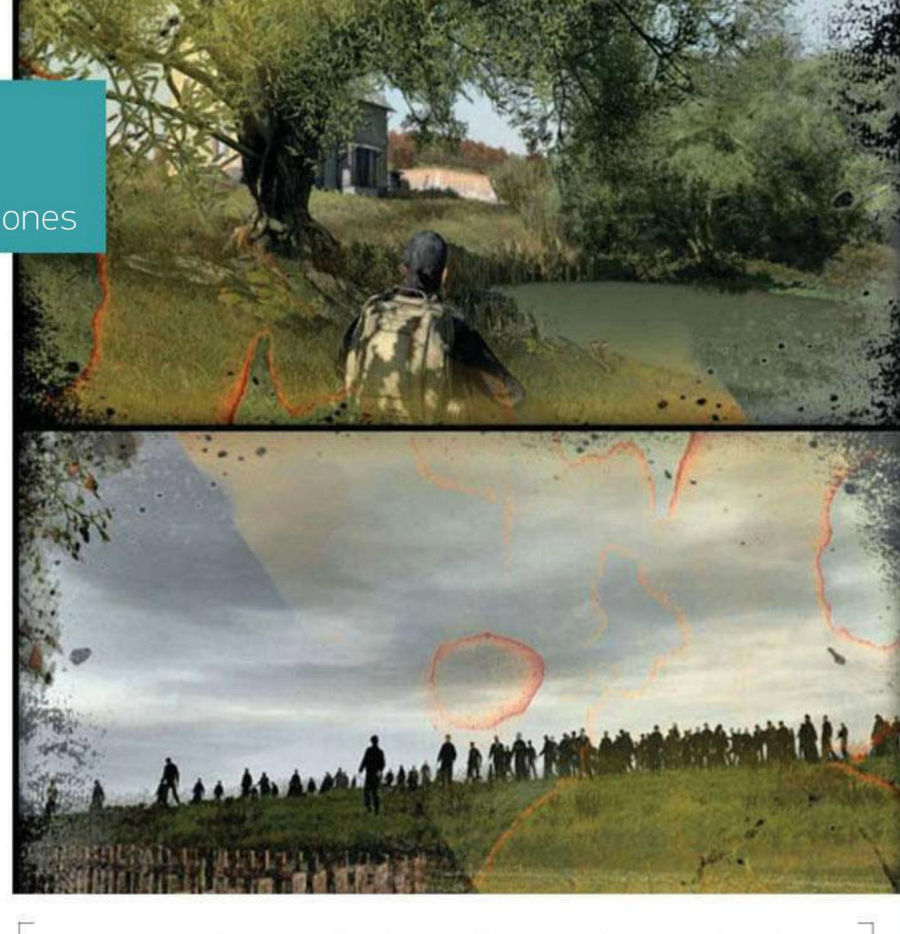
> "We need to track ten fingers, within a hundredth of a millimetre accuracy, and let people hold things and grab things"
>
> Michael Buckwald, Leap Motion

For gamers, the possibilities are tantalising, as with many new interfaces. One need only look to Holtz, who can't help geeking out about his creation, for a glimpse of the future: "I'm looking forward to doing something in *StarCraft* where I can select these units, and these units, and move them, and do it all simultaneously. Why do I have to do one thing at a time?" he says, matter-of-factly. "I have two hands."

Above It's still early days at Leap Motion, but they are growing rapidly ahead of their February launch date.



#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Nick Jones



DayZ: the Arma II mod that's become an overnight online phenomenon



Emergent gameplay: a lot of people talk about it, a lot of games claim to have it, but not many games around at the moment are actually capable of creating a real emergent gaming experience.

It's a real buzzword in gaming right now. Emergent gaming is, to say, an improvised gaming moment that comes about because of the open nature of a game and the participation and/or creativity of the player. These are moments that are generally unique to the player but can also be shared with other players, especially in the case of MMOs or other online games.

Like I say, some MMOs have the potential for it, *Minecraft* certainly has it, and one game in particular has it in spades.

I've been fascinated this month with watching YouTube videos of people playing *DayZ*. It's a mod, currently still in alpha, for Bohemia Interactive's *Arma II*, which converts this ultra-realistic war simulation into a rather amazing zombie holocaust survival sim.

DayZ drops the player into a huge, open world populated by wildlife, trees, farmhouses, a few vehicles, zombies and, of course, other human players. The object of the game is simply to survive by gathering resources, but these items are strictly limited and the rules tough: players must find food and water to live on, weapons to defend themselves with, and medicine to heal wounds. *DayZ* is hardcore survival, and every other player is out for the same thing: self-preservation.

Now, anyone who knows me knows that I hate zombie games. I actually hate all things zombies because it's such a lazy thing to do. Let's make a comic book/movie/game with zombies in it! How original. But *DayZ* is different. I think this is because it's not really a game about zombies – the undead in *DayZ* are actually kind of pathetic – but it's about human nature and how people react to extreme circumstances, in this case the end of the world.



Alliances are formed and broken, trust is in short supply, and double-crossing, traps and murder are everywhere. This is a man-eat-man world and people are prepared to do anything to survive.

What's wonderful about *DayZ* are the stories – truly emergent gaming stories – and the culture that's arisen around this: players sharing tales and experiences that are unique to their game but also enjoy common threads. And, like any good online phenomenon, there's a wealth of memes borne from experiences of *DayZ*: the NW Airfield, exploring Cherno, bandits.

I don't have room to go into more detail here, but I implore you to point your browsers at YouTube and search for '*DayZ* - Grand Massacre', check the *DayZ* channel on Reddit or wade through the hundreds of posts on the *DayZ* forum, where players share their stories. It's fascinating.

The *DayZ* phenomenon reminds me in many ways of *Minecraft* and how by opening up that game from the point of alpha, Mojang was able to involve the community in its development. *Minecraft*, without doubt, went on to be a better game because of the community's input. It's a process that would be impossible on console, but, like *Minecraft*, console owners may reap the rewards of *DayZ*'s development, especially now it has been taken in by Bohemia as a full, standalone game.

For me, it's a glimpse of what online gaming can be in the future, if developers and publishers are brave enough to give gamers a basic set of rules for a game world and then just let them get on with it. Most games rely on scripted gameplay, but *DayZ* shows that you don't need to blow up the Eiffel Tower to create brilliant gaming experiences. Just give players the option to blow it up. If they want to.

> It's a glimpse of what online gaming can be if developers are brave enough to give gamers a basic set of rules and then just let them get on with it

Nick Jones is editor in chief of





Is social gaming dead?

→ FarmVille maker Zynga posts a substantial net loss in its latest financial report that shakes the industry

Zynga's second quarter earnings report has caused analysts to ask whether the social gaming bubble has well and truly burst. The company best known for social games *FarmVille*, *CityVille* and *Mafia Wars* reported a $22.9 million loss, which was shortly followed by its share price dropping by a staggering 40 per cent in after-hours trading. Zynga has made some controversial choices in the last year, not least purchasing *Draw Something* developer OMGPOP for $180 million. The outlook for the company – and social gaming as a whole – is looking rather bleak if analyst Richard Greenfield of BTIG is to be believed. "Right now, everything is going wrong for Zynga," Greenfield told *The New York Times*. "In a rapidly changing internet landscape that is moving to mobile, it's very hard to have confidence these issues are temporary."

GAME DEV STORY
with Q-Games' James Mielke

From Q to Q: moving from one landmark development studio to another



The gaming industry changes so fast these days, but never so much for me as in the past few months. Shortly after concluding work on the Japanese version of *Lumines Electronic Symphony*, I found myself with no immediate projects to work on at Q Entertainment, because the company was moving its resources (read: staff) into the development of social and mobile games in Asia-specific markets, which wasn't an area where I wanted to focus my efforts. I had spent a good portion of the past three years observing the mechanics of social games, to use this knowledge in broadening the appeal of the core games I was working on, but I didn't really want to dive full on into a world of *FarmVille* clones or *Draw Something*-alikes. So it was with some sadness but a renewed sense of purpose that I gave my notice at Q Entertainment, and started to look for development opportunities elsewhere. For a while after I'd made this decision, I explored the possibility of setting up my own indie studio, working for one of the console makers, and/or moving to France, the Bay Area, or back to New York City from whence I came. So it came as a bit of a surprise that my next opportunity would come from an innocuously posted Facebook photo.

Since I was, at this point, only heading into Q Entertainment once a week to discuss designs I had contributed for a *Rez*-like iPad game, I made a point of visiting my favourite neighbourhood curry shop while I still had the chance. As people tend to do in Japan, one day while eating this delicious meal I posted a picture of it on Facebook, with the simple caption: "I sure am going to miss this curry." Cue: Dylan Cuthbert, president, founder, and friend at Kyoto-based Q-Games, makers of the *PixelJunk* series, PS3 visualizers, PS2 duck demo, *Star Fox* 3DS, etc. He simply inquired, "Where are you off to?" This triggered a casual message exchange via Facebook that pretty much boiled down to "I'm looking to take the next step in game development" and "You should apply at the 'other' Q", which was one of those wink-nudge jokes since Q-Games actually existed before Q Entertainment did.

So I quickly arranged a video conference chat with some of the core members of the Q-Games team: Kentaro Yoshida, Shouichi Tominaga, Kazushi Maeta and Rowan Arte. We had a nice hour and a half conversation about whether I would be a good fit for Q-Games, and if Q-Games would be a good fit for me. Less than two hours after we concluded the conversation, Dylan – who wasn't present in the actual interview, so as to let the team feel me out unhindered – sent me a message asking, "So when do you start?"

Although I didn't give Q an answer right away – I had to weigh a lot of options, primarily the pull to return home to New York City – ultimately the opportunity to 1) work with such a well-regarded, professional team – I've long respected the programmers of the industry, and Q-Games and Dylan in particular are known for their coding acumen – 2) bring my own experience to such a group, and 3) move to Kyoto proved too irresistible to pass up. So after a whirlwind month of organising the big move, looking for a place in Kyoto, and saying goodbye to all of our Tokyo-based friends, the family and I moved to the beautiful city of Kyoto, known for its natural beauty, geisha and incredible summer heat.

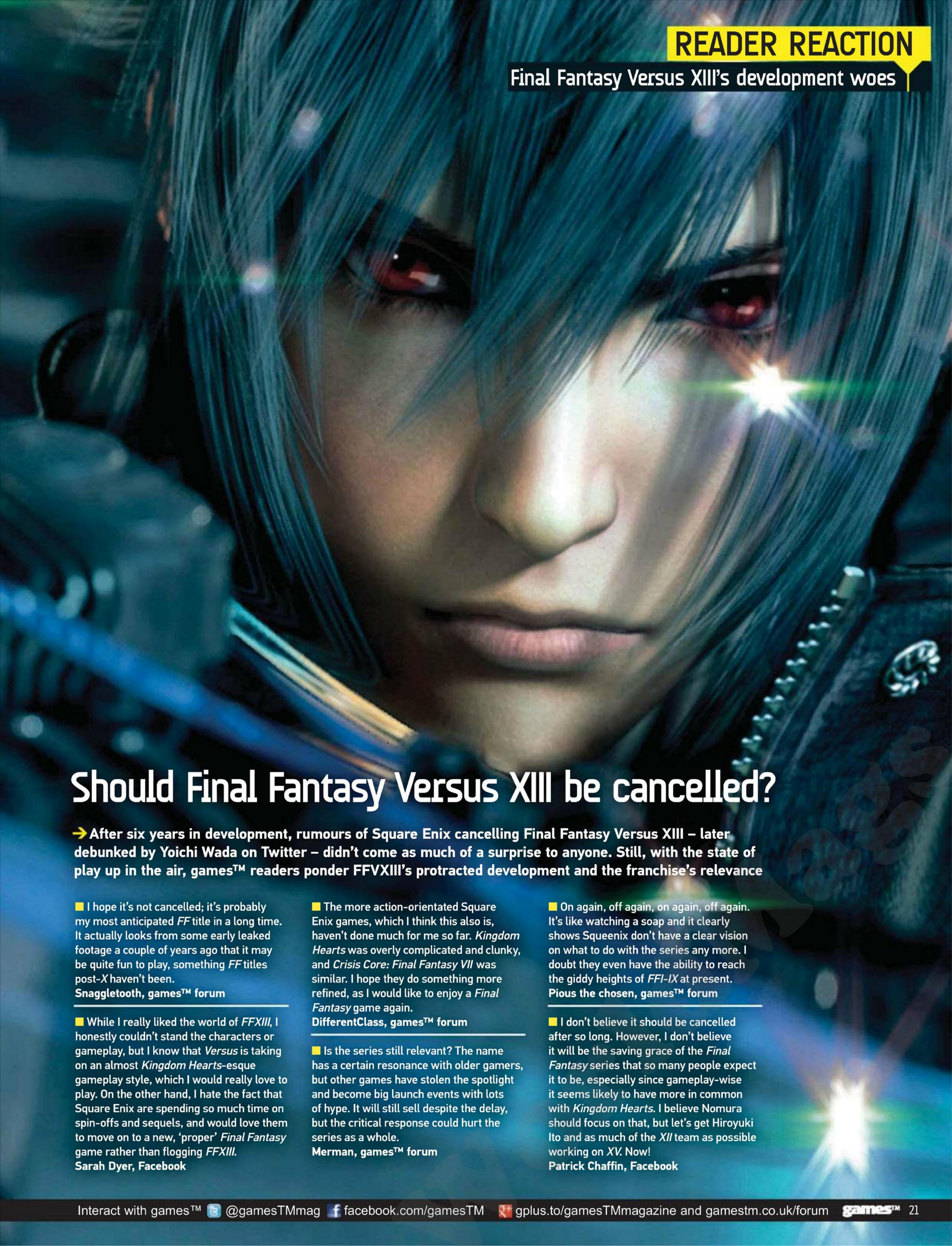
With the help of my cousin who lives in Osaka, we found a lovely apartment with a backyard (a rarity) right near the famous Heian Jingu shrine, and across the street from a sakura-tree-lined river. I also traded an almost hour-long commute in Tokyo for a leisurely 15-minute bike ride to the office in Kyoto. Although it's only been less than a month since I officially started at Q-Games, I am already impressed with the organic way in which they approach the work day. The work hours are structured, and Q-Games is a company that works hard and plays hard. They're organic and open in their creative process, and unlike a lot of game developers in Japan, they don't burn your candle at both ends. The guys I work with – I'm the new producer on the *PixelJunk* series, by the way – are all interesting and nice, and made me feel like one of the team right away. It's not every day that a person gets to move from one respected game developer to another, and even fewer that get to move from Q to Q, but such is my fortune and I am grateful for it. The stuff we're working on is truly exciting and the future has never looked brighter.

James Mielke is a producer at Q-Games

It's not every day that a person gets to move from one respected game developer to another, and even fewer that get to move from Q to Q

TRADING TOKYO FOR KYOTO

■ IT WAS Dylan Cuthbert who told me – repeatedly – that I would have a lot of fun in Kyoto, and as it turned out he was right. When I was a journalist, travelling frequently to Japan over the last 12 years, I thought that Tokyo was just about the best place on Earth after my native NYC, but as someone who now is married with a kid, the more languid pace of Kyoto, the grid-based layout of the city, and the wealth of natural beauty on offer here has totally swayed me in favour of the Kansai area, Tokyo being the Kanto region. Tokyo is still a fantastic place to visit if you can handle the hustle and bustle, but Kyoto is a much better place to live. Although the summers are brutal, the beautiful neighbouring cities of Osaka and Nara are close by, giving you plenty of things to do and see.



Should Final Fantasy Versus XIII be cancelled?

→ After six years in development, rumours of Square Enix cancelling Final Fantasy Versus XIII – later debunked by Yoichi Wada on Twitter – didn't come as much of a surprise to anyone. Still, with the state of play up in the air, games™ readers ponder FFVXIII's protracted development and the franchise's relevance

■ I hope it's not cancelled; it's probably my most anticipated *FF* title in a long time. It actually looks from some early leaked footage a couple of years ago that it may be quite fun to play, something *FF* titles post-*X* haven't been.
Snaggletooth, games™ forum

■ While I really liked the world of *FFXIII*, I honestly couldn't stand the characters or gameplay, but I know that *Versus* is taking on an almost *Kingdom Hearts*-esque gameplay style, which I would really love to play. On the other hand, I hate the fact that Square Enix are spending so much time on spin-offs and sequels, and would love them to move on to a new, 'proper' *Final Fantasy* game rather than flogging *FFXIII*.
Sarah Dyer, Facebook

■ The more action-orientated Square Enix games, which I think this also is, haven't done much for me so far. *Kingdom Hearts* was overly complicated and clunky, and *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* was similar. I hope they do something more refined, as I would like to enjoy a *Final Fantasy* game again.
DifferentClass, games™ forum

■ Is the series still relevant? The name has a certain resonance with older gamers, but other games have stolen the spotlight and become big launch events with lots of hype. It will still sell despite the delay, but the critical response could hurt the series as a whole.
Merman, games™ forum

■ On again, off again, on again, off again. It's like watching a soap and it clearly shows Squeenix don't have a clear vision on what to do with the series any more. I doubt they even have the ability to reach the giddy heights of *FFI-IX* at present.
Pious the chosen, games™ forum

■ I don't believe it should be cancelled after so long. However, I don't believe it will be the saving grace of the *Final Fantasy* series that so many people expect it to be, especially since gameplay-wise it seems likely to have more in common with *Kingdom Hearts*. I believe Nomura should focus on that, but let's get Hiroyuki Ito and as much of the *XII* team as possible working on *XV*. Now!
Patrick Chaffin, Facebook

The Price of Freedom

Arkane Studios has been given free rein to create a game based on its own vision. Backed by the behemoth that is Bethesda, Dishonored is slowly starting to become one of the most interesting and sought after offerings of 2012. games™ sits down with Zenimax's Viktor Antonov and goes hands-on with the experience to see just how much of an impact it could make

When games decide to employ choice and consequence as a karmic quandary to define a player, rarely does it feel anything other than a pragmatic plot device. It's a trap that Arkane Studios could easily fall into with *Dishonored*.

Luckily, the game has little time for such parlour tricks. Viktor Antonov, Zenimax's visual design director, is keen to push such an issue: "[We are] non-procedural. I don't like *Far Cry* or *Crysis* that are based on procedural or re-creation of reality. Everything [in *Dishonored*] was made by somebody and drawn by hand. We're non-realistic. We don't stick to history or facts or realism. We make our own stylised, dream-like story. These are the main two points that make it different from any other game."

So while an alignment system is present in the game to inflict a superficial transformation on the protagonist, denoting a series of 'crucial' choices, it's a mechanic that is more concerned with how you affect the larger world around you, as opposed to a singular person. As players guide antihero Corvo across the cobbled streets and slatted rooftops of Dunwall, his actions – such as whether he chooses to kill innocents – will determine how the toxic plague will spread through the city, resulting in dynamic changes in AI and the environment. As an example, this could mean that more environmental hazards appear, such as an increase in the flesh-eating rats that are carrying the plague to the ravaged city. The developer promises such minor actions will affect the ending too, the same being said for those who dare try to finish

it without slaying a soul, an aim it promises is possible.

"Replaying the same room, the same corner, the same street in different ways makes a much deeper and richer experience than driving or flying through entire cities that are shallow," Antonov continues. "That was a success and a pleasant part: you can approach the same square inch of the game several times and you will find different aspects to them. The game is so organic with emergent gameplay, so you really have to trust this game. There was no story written at [the start] – just the game concept and a context. We jumped to create a new world; a world people don't really do any more: a realistic, profound world with a lot of atmosphere rather than going to Mars or the moon, which makes you feel detached. In our case, the art, script or story didn't



■ *Lost* actor Josh Holloway has been confirmed as the voice of protagonist Corvo. Don't expect him to be quite so charitable with the charming nicknames.

> "YOU CAN TAKE CREATIVE RISKS AND KNOW THAT PEOPLE OUT THERE ARE WAITING FOR THIS"
> VIKTOR ANTONOV, Zenimax

exist, but we started thinking about all three at the same time and the story started to develop."

For the most part, *Dishonored* endeavours to provide a more immediate result to the myriad choices presented throughout this sprawling, fantastical world.

One mission has Corvo pursuing an eminent member of Dunwall's royal circle, Anton Sokolov – a task set within the heart of the rat-infested city. The vengeance-fuelled swordsman has multiple avenues he can take to infiltrate the target's lair: there's the high road option, creeping across the rooftops before dropping through an opening above; battling through a throng of guards towards the entrance and breaking in; or using one of the

clandestine tunnels located beneath the tightly guarded facility. These ideas aren't limited, either. Another situation sees you posed with the task of skulking into a masquerade ball, a concept not too removed from the likes of *Assassin's Creed*. Where *Dishonored* is concerned, however, there's a little bit more charm. After hopping a high wall and stealing a necessary invitation, our target is murdered following a brief moment of seduction. With our new lady friend wooed, it takes nothing more than a conversation to move proceedings to somewhere more comfortable. To her, the bedroom; for us, away from the guards. For those less enamoured with the thought of using seduction as a weapon, Arkane is more than happy to open the pathway of possessing a fish, sneaking through the sewers and killing the bounty on the toilet…

Such ideals have been in place since the studio first started crafting the project. Rather than seeing the structural design of the environment as a necessity, it's intrinsically linked into how *Dishonored* operates on a larger level. As Antonov explains: "Architecture is a main way of expression because you see buildings everywhere. They are more than a character. This is where you will play your game. Lighting and stylisation as well… these are our three major parameters we can control and express ourselves through."

Dishonored evolves from this base too, an imposing number of efficient supernatural powers available to help Corvo with his quest. Players can teleport over short distances with the 'Blink' ability, or possess nearby animals – mostly rats – with 'Possession', and Corvo himself is acrobatic enough to scale tall ledges and fling himself across the Victorian scenery.



While there will be plenty of supernatural abilities and firepower on your side, Corvo's primary weapon is his sword.

This resourceful selection of powers is matched by a potent, albeit relatively lean, selection of firearms. Pistols and grenades are the most devastating additions to the arsenal, but the crossbow is the highlight – geared for both high-impact assault and stealthy precision. Explosive-tipped darts will engulf targets in a burst of flames, while the subtler tranquilliser dart will inconspicuously have enemies snoozing in a corner.

Interior environments are just as diverse as their exteriors as well. Corvo will encounter deadly electrified doors, and players are presented with a choice to either navigate around these traps or find ways to disengage the shield. It all sounds very geared towards stealth gameplay, but Arkane understands that there has to be an equally satisfying counterpoint, and there's a real sense of raw gratification for players who decide to take the easy road.

Combat is brutal, sickeningly absurd and beguilingly lurid. A swift swipe of Corvo's sword, which is his primary weapon, mapped to the right trigger, will send a foe's head flying off his shoulders, while elsewhere vermin hungrily peck away at the corpse of a recently immolated soldier. There's even an ability to momentarily halt time, enabling Corvo to eliminate several enemies without a second ticking by. It's only after extracting Sokolov from his rooftop botanical shelter that it becomes apparent how dense the design of this small pocket of the city is. Several non-playable characters await rescue in one far-flung corner of the map, prepared to surrender a few local secrets for their freedom, while plenty of nooks and crannies remain unexplored, containing items or simply representing another route that Corvo could have chosen to

> "[THE DESIGN] WAS LIKE AN ORGANIC BACK AND FORTH, A LOT LIKE JAZZ IMPROVISATION"
> VIKTOR ANTONOV, Zenimax



Incidental dialogue will change depending on Corvo's interactions. Kill everyone and it gets depressing.



ART ATTACK



Much has been made of Viktor Antonov's stunning art direction, typified by the charcoal black alleyways and futuristic steampunk technology. This oppressive vision not only strengthens the ominous undertones to the game's storyline, but the actual cartoonish design to the character models is a surprisingly ideal complement to the ultra-violence and themes simmering beneath the facade of *Dishonored*'s campaign. Never does the game shy away from a bit of gore or scenes of extreme bloodshed, and so this angle certainly makes it more palatable and engrossing – almost like a hugely stylised graphic novel. As the game progresses and Corvo's actions begin to transform the world around him, it will be interesting to see how the visuals develop to reflect the deteriorating state of Dunwall.

reach his target. It was all borne out of what appears to be a unique design process, one that Antonov is happy to acknowledge: "[The project] was a back and forth between our game directors and our team, right to the level designers. It was like an organic back and forth, a lot like jazz improvisation. We had a very small team – there was four or five people creating the whole game – and they were by themselves in the early days."

It's a testament to the fidelity of Arkane's design that, with so many avenues of opportunity available to the player, there's never a sense that one particular route has been included as an afterthought. It's fair to say that the brains behind *Dishonored* have managed to craft a bold new IP founded on an incredibly dense world, a risk the developer was well aware it was taking.

"For this project, we had an opportunity to do a new IP, a new game, which is a very rare opportunity nowadays because it's always sequels and sequels," Antonov continues. "Gamers and players out there want innovation and new stuff and to see that you took some risks. Developers are afraid they may not make their money back, but sometimes you hit that sweet spot between accessibility and risk-taking, and this was a game that was risky and didn't fit any category. Once announced to the public, it was embraced and understood very quickly."

A new IP it may be, but *Dishonored* is slowly becoming one of the most interesting games of the year. Built by a team in the enviable position of being backed by a big publisher that's happy to let them run free, Arkane has stuck meticulously to its vision, crafting a title that is aiming to be unlike what people expect. There will, ultimately, be similarities, but the respect and creativity the developer is giving to the individual could result in something special. What this does for the studio going forward will depend on the game's success, as usual, but don't expect *Dishonored* to fail like many new IPs. Like us, we'd advise you to keep a very close eye on what's coming our way on 12 October, if only to see if Arkane has managed to create a game that truly does stand head and shoulders above many of its rivals. It may just surprise you…



POWER IN YOUR HANDS

HOW ARKANE'S STYLISED, UNIQUE WORLD ALLOWS DISHONORED TO EMBRACE THE SUPERNATURAL

BEND TIME

CORVO HAS the ability to manipulate time, slowing it down for those around him while he is able to move as normal. Like all the powers in *Dishonored*, it can be upgraded, putting the entire world in stasis if it is levelled up to the right degree.

WIND BLAST

WHILE NOT a million miles away from other games that have offered a similar power, *Dishonored* still manages to make its wind ability slightly more interesting by allowing Corvo to use it to destroy locked doors. Mainly, it's there to put enemies on the ground.

POSSESSION

POSSESSION IS fairly self-explanatory, but the interesting element is that it doesn't seem to have too many boundaries. Even fish are capable of being taken over, with the ultimate prize of human embodiment coming once the power has evolved.

BLINK

ESSENTIALLY A form of teleportation that Corvo can use to travel across short distances, Blink is different in that it's an ability that he can perform from the start. When used in conjunction with the double jump, the two can work in tandem to move even further.

DARK VISION

GRANTING THE power to see through objects, and in turn spy on potential threats or entities to possess, it also hands Corvo the ability to see which direction enemies are looking, giving you the option to formulate far more intricate sneak plans.





WHY I ♥...

Mirror's Edge

VIKTOR ANTONOV,
ARKANE STUDIOS

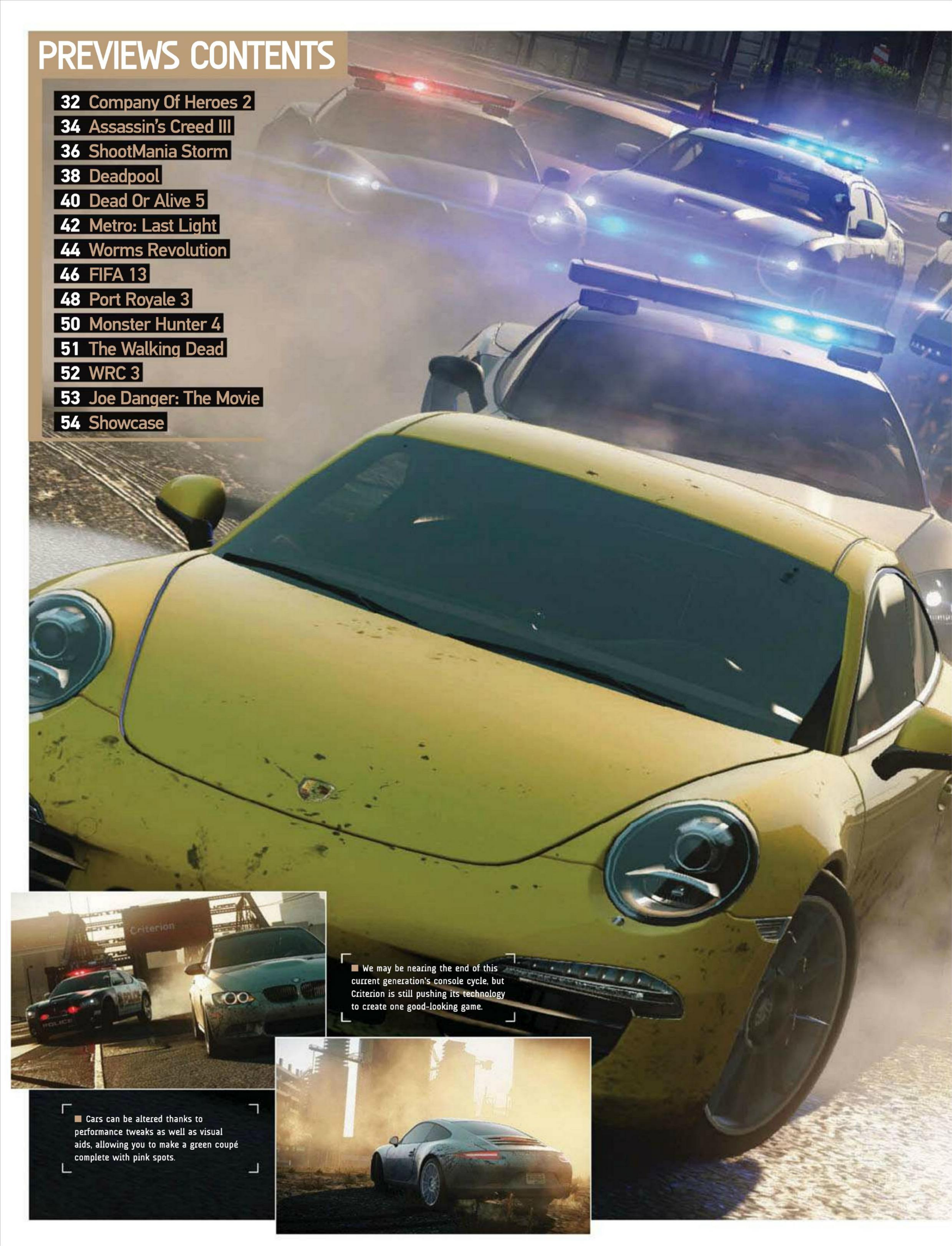
I'm still really stuck on and really impressed by the Mirror's Edge *concept by EA's Digital Illusions.* Mirror's Edge *to me is a key reference and an example of good, pure design. It's radical, and yet very simplified at the same time. It involves the exploration of sheer physical sensations like jumping, running and flying, and what I like is that* Mirror's Edge *is about experiencing a city and its architecture in a meaningful way, rather than just having it there as a mere backdrop to the game. I'm particularly struck by having this fiction and design in which no colours exist and there's just white and red. It's just all very brave.*



"Mirror's Edge is about experiencing a city and its architecture in a meaningful way, rather than just having it there as a mere backdrop"

VIKTOR ANTONOV, ARKANE STUDIOS

PREVIEWS CONTENTS



We may be nearing the end of this current generation's console cycle, but Criterion is still pushing its technology to create one good-looking game.

Cars can be altered thanks to performance tweaks as well as visual aids, allowing you to make a green coupé complete with pink spots.



Need For Speed: Most Wanted

CONCEPT ■ Criterion, now given the franchise officially, continues to rebuild the *Need For Speed* brand using all the tools that made *Burnout* such a success.

How Criterion is trying to re-imagine the arcade racer in its entirety

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
iOS, PC, PlayStation 3, PS Vita, Wii U, Xbox 360
Origin:
UK
Publisher:
EA
Developer:
Criterion Games
Release:
2 November
Players:
1-16

Developer Profile

Making its mark on the videogame sphere thanks to the still-popular *Burnout* series, Criterion is also remembered by some for the likes of *Redline Racer* and the still very much loved *Black*. Now dedicated to bringing the *Need For Speed* franchise back to former glory, its skill for the racing genre has been proven time and time again.

Developer History

Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit
2010 [Multi]
Burnout Paradise
2008 [Multi]
Black
2006 [Multi]
Burnout
2001 [Multi]

High Point

Burnout Paradise may have been an anomaly to some, but those willing to give it the time and patience it deserved found a racing game with the blistering pace of others in the series, as well as a layer of depth that none of its competitors could match.

Need For Speed is a franchise anomaly. It's been in the public consciousness long enough to be considered a veteran, but it's hard to think of another series that's hit such fantastic highs alongside several embarrassing lows. Step in Criterion. There's a reason, and a very good one, why EA has officially given its long-running racing game to the British developer, namely because the studio knows what touches games such as *Need For Speed* require – anyone calling for evidence only has to sit down with 2010's *Hot Pursuit* for a few minutes to see the class and polish that Criterion constantly delivers. The re-emerging of *Most Wanted* under its banner is just more proof of that.

Complete with 132 cars, all unlocked and hidden from the start around a complete city, this is a racing playground created by a group of designers who have already proven how skilled they are at implementing such an idea. In order to rectify certain criticisms aimed at *Burnout Paradise*'s open world, though, Criterion has littered this one with challenges and new concepts, such as 'Jackspots', where it's possible to steal or change cars.

> "We've brought everything we know about racing, chasing and exploration and smashed them together"
> MATT WEBSTER CRITERION GAMES

"When we finished *Hot Pursuit*, we looked at what we were going to do next and we looked at the entire history of *Need For Speed*," Mark Webster, executive producer at Criterion, told **gamesTM**. "But when looking at what we were going to do next, the one name that we loved out of the entire series was *Most Wanted*. As we said at E3 and keep reiterating, we don't make sequels to other people's games. So when it came to looking at what *Most Wanted* meant for us, coming off the back of *Burnout Paradise* and *Hot Pursuit*, where we introduced Autolog and put competing with friends at the heart of the game, we knew we wanted to make it about being Most Wanted among your friends."

It's almost a summary of everything the studio has been working on to date, and while this dedication to community play is at the heart of the experience, *Most Wanted* isn't a game satisfied with being a one-trick pony. With a handling model that's built with a slightly heavier and more realistic twist than *Burnout*, it remains simple and, more importantly to many, offers plenty of opportunities to gracefully drift around corners. As you do so, Criterion seems dead set on constantly attracting your attention with car-specific events, which can unlock upgrades depending on how you perform, interspersed with what *Most Wanted* has and always will be about: enticing the police into a car chase that Hollywood action movies would have a hard time topping.

Craig Sullivan, Criterion's creative director, weighs in: "We've made a lot of driving games and we play a lot of driving games. But ultimately, they're getting a bit boring. I don't want to drive a really nice, shiny car around a track many more times. We've done that, right? Even though this is an open-world driving game made by Criterion, and there will be similarities between this game and the ones we've made before, [...] when you start *Most Wanted*, unlike any other driving game you've played, all of the cars are unlocked from the start. But they're not in your garage, parked up and all shiny. They're all placed around the city, and if you find one, you jack into and play in that car and there's a whole load of bespoke gameplay for

each – the amount of events and the types of events change."

As such, the dynamic art of the chase remains, made far superior than before thanks to the genius AI that the developer has put in place. Built with line-of-sight intelligence in mind, the cops will constantly and astutely call for backup, so the idea of always keeping tabs on you is never broken. Naturally, however, the brains behind *Burnout* have to ensure there's a constant carrot dangling alongside the ever-present goal of avoiding the fuzz. This comes in the form of cooldown spots, specific areas where you can hide or escape the police entirely. Alongside the intensity that the search for one can bring to a hunt, it ties directly into the six levels of 'wantedness' that will, as expected, increase the more trouble you get into. Not a million miles away from the *Grand Theft Auto* model, it's how Criterion aims to expand those foundations where multiplayer is concerned that will raise a few eyebrows.

Sullivan explains: "We've got the ability to become Most Wanted among your friends. When you play, everything earns you Speed Points. Speed Points are the main currency in the game and they'll take you up the Most Wanted list. If you play *Call Of Duty* or any kind of online RPG and earn XP as you play, Speed Points are basically the same thing. There's constant competition going on, both high-level and low-level. Even if you're not actively engaged in trying to beat someone, the game is doing those comparisons for you and making them automatic and simple. Autolog in *Hot Pursuit* was just the first step for us – was very simple and just compared events. *Most Wanted* compares everything, all the time. There's a much greater depth and a much wider variety of competition."

> "We're creating an experience that is already playing out unlike any driving game I've played before"
>
> CRAIG SULLIVAN CRITERION GAMES

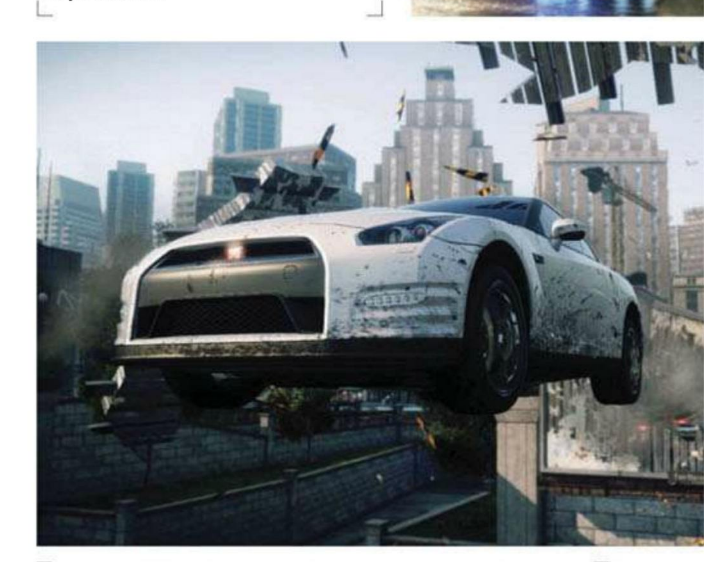
/// It looks like being a persistent re-imagining of the age-old leaderboard concept, and it has the potential to be the most innovative aspect of *Most Wanted*, and where a huge part of its longevity comes from. It harks back to *Burnout Paradise*, where multiplayer was integrated directly into the experience – meaning it's always possible to instantly drop into a friend's world – and events are based on procedural playlists generated in-game, meaning at one moment you could be competing in a standard race, only to suddenly find yourself attempting to out-jump or drift a friend. It's how seamless this aspect is that enables the game to stand out, though. Once you've summoned your chosen rivals to a specific point on a map and instigated an event, *Most Wanted* will carry on effortlessly after the competition has come to an end. The idea of a stop/start, structured racing system clearly interests Criterion no longer.

Speed Points go further than just this, with the whole concept being the heart that beats at *Most Wanted*'s core, an element that Webster is keen to highlight. "We're really big on connected play, and I think this is the most highly connected game of this generation," he tells us. "We're taking the concept of Autolog and automatic comparisons and injecting deep and directly into the game – not just performances but faces, stats and so on. We're taking the competition further than we've ever done before. We're also doing something called Cloud Compete, which is competition that can break out beyond the console. If I'm playing the game on my iPhone and earn Speed Points, those points will be added to the ones I get in the 360 version, for example, and drive me up the Most Wanted list." For anyone who assumes Criterion isn't ready to take a few risks with a major franchise, such a daring proposal shows that the company is embracing the next step of what videogames could become.

/// When all of this is taken aboard, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that, in many ways, this is everything *Burnout Paradise 2* could have been, but Criterion has ensured that its own unique brand of creativity and innovation, along with *Most Wanted*'s heritage, is what's shaping the game's foundations. It's an addition to the racing genre that refuses to rely on any one aspect that could be seen as passé, instead lighting the way for others to both observe and follow suit. The likes of *Split/Second* and *Blur* certainly did a good job in trying to create and push new concepts but, unfortunately, neither of the development houses behind them exists any more. Since their departure, there's no one else attempting to invigorate the field or trying to inject some much-needed passion into it. Yes, the upcoming *Forza Horizon* has some promise, but it's Playground Games' first offering and could stumble a tad because of just that. So, while *Gran Turismo* and *Forza* fight over who can capture the realism of driving, it seems it's up to Criterion to ensure the same love is represented where the lines between fantasy and reality are a little more blurred. If *Hot Pursuit* is anything to go by, there's no one else who could even come close, let alone actually be on the cusp of succeeding.



Above: Being set in an open world certainly brings a lot more options to the table. Intelligently, Criterion has taken a look at what other sandbox games do, such as including a 'wanted' rating that's been used countless times elsewhere. Right: Fairhaven City has been built with exploration in mind, with numerous secret routes and areas on hand for you to stumble across. How much this ties in to the aforementioned hidden vehicles and racing lines is yet to be seen.



Above: *Most Wanted* was always going to focus on police chases and the intensity behind them – the name alone is proof of just that. Criterion, however, isn't happy with merely rehashing what's been done in the past, it being intent on bringing something new to the masses.



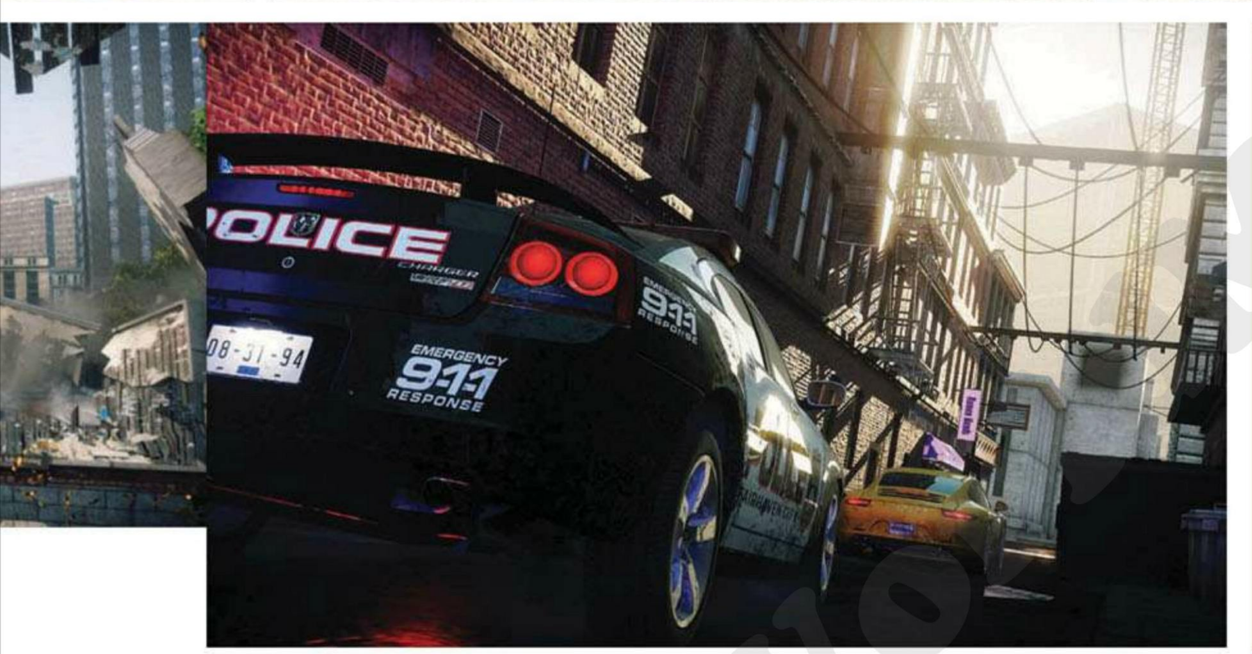
CRAFT YOUR PATH

IT'S ONE thing to incorporate an open world into the racing genre, but to do so while allowing total freedom requires a whole new skill entirely. Much like *Burnout Paradise*, any race you choose to take on will never have a set path, instead asking you to decide in which way to head. Not only does it ensure that no race ever feels overly planned or stagnant, but it also throws up a constant curveball that will create genuine tension between players: do you go with your gut, or try to find new options by stealing someone else's route? Aside from the endless replayability it potentially opens up, it requires a level of trust and acceptance on the player's end, rather than the humdrum setups of old.





■ Above: With 132 cars, you'll be a little spoilt for choice in terms of what you can drive. The real joy with *Most Wanted*, however, is that all these vehicles are unlocked from the get-go. You'll have to hunt them down first, but the content will be available. Left: Just what tactics the cops will use, or how aggressive they will get, is anyone's guess, but Criterion guarantees it'll be a huge step up from what we're used to.



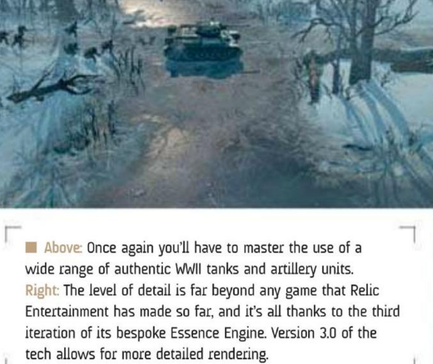
TUNED IN

WHEN CRITERION announced that Autolog, introduced in *Hot Pursuit*, would tie in to a much bigger set of plans, it wasn't kidding. Speed Points are one such addition, but it's how the system is becoming so seamless that's most impressive. *Most Wanted* is embedding it right into the centre of the experience, recommendations coming straight from the game world. Considering the open environment already in place, one of Criterion's top priorities does seem to be to keep you in Fairhaven and then ensure you never want or have to leave. It is, in reality, the first racing game to embrace the idea of an open world properly, and, more to the point, it's creating a damn good one.

Right: The Russians talked about the effects of 'General Snow' on the Eastern Front, and in *COH2* it's the environmental factor that will have the biggest effect on play. Moving on roads will be quicker, but you'll be predictable and open to ambush attacks. Below: The sheer level of detail in *COH2* is astounding, and, zooming in, it's almost at the level of a third-person action game. You can see the details on your men's weapons and uniforms, bringing them to life on the battlefield.

NOT A SINGLE STEP BACKWARDS

COMPANY OF HEROES has always been as realistic as possible, and on the Eastern Front there was a particularly nasty reality that Relic Entertainment has included in the latest instalment. During the height of the war, Stalin issued Order 227, which declared, "Not one step back", and ordered Soviet troops to fire upon fellow soldiers who broke ranks and retreated, no matter the reason. That's been translated into gameplay in *COH2*, with any units that retreat – your troops all have a panic threshold – under fire being gunned down by special Soviet units. It's harsh, shocking stuff, but a reflection of the historical reality and something you'll have to consider when planning your in-game attacks against intimidating forces.





Above: Once again you'll have to master the use of a wide range of authentic WWII tanks and artillery units. Right: The level of detail is far beyond any game that Relic Entertainment has made so far, and it's all thanks to the third iteration of its bespoke Essence Engine. Version 3.0 of the tech allows for more detailed rendering.



Company Of Heroes 2

CONCEPT ■ Relic Entertainment throws itself into the breach once more to deliver a hard-hitting and realistic military RTS, bringing the Soviet front in WWII to life.

Things hot up on the cold Eastern Front

War, contrary to what you may have heard, is constantly changing. It evolves, becoming ever deadlier and more complex, and rather ironically is often the biggest driver of technological progress. Little wonder, then, the genre most closely based on war, the RTS, is a similarly evolving creature, only rather than advancing our killing methods, it finds new ways to accurately simulate the feel of battle with exciting gameplay. No one knows that better than Relic Entertainment. Its seminal *Company Of Heroes* shifted the emphasis from base-building and resource management to tactical play on a squad level, and both its WWII setting and a high level of graphical fidelity injected a massive dose of reality into the whole affair. In *COH*, you felt thrust into the bloody heart of war, but realistically relied on genuine strategic play rather than build-and-rush tactics.

Now, mindful that genre fans have massive expectations for a sequel, Relic is upping the tactical realism of *Company Of Heroes 2* through new battles on the Eastern Front.

It's an arena not as many Western gamers are familiar with, but the battles of 'The Great Patriotic War', as the Soviets dubbed it, were monstrous affairs where the Germans suffered 80 per cent of their WWII casualties, easing pressure on the Allies on the Western front at the cost of 10 million Russian troops. It's a great historical debt that Relic is very aware of, and that's framing its realistic take here. Rather than simply following a company of soldiers as you did with Able Company through *COH* – individual Red Army units didn't survive long in the Eastern front – you'll see the war through the eyes of a roving war correspondent. That gives Relic the opportunity to let you play as various infantry, tank and artillery units across the conflict, and get to grips with their combined arms and its additions to gameplay.

/// Line of sight is always key in any RTS; if your units can't see the enemy, they can't attack, and *COH2* introduces a far more dynamic system. Rather than their vision punching a perfectly circular hole in the fog of war, in *COH2* you only see what your units see. It allows for nasty surprises, like walking round a building to see a tank barrel pointed at your men, or emerging from a forest into the withering fire of a concealed machine gun nest. Units have new skills, like infantry, which can now vault over cover, rather than having to go round or blow through it, helping them escape artillery fire or any vehicles pinning them down. This gives players who use them right the tactical edge of greater mobility. You'll need that, as Soviet troops, while more numerous, aren't as well equipped as their German counterparts.

COH always takes the environment into account to realistically determine unit movement and speed, and on the snowy Eastern Front that's more important than ever. Snow will slow your units down, forcing you to use the roads – but predictability in war is a weakness, and that introduces an all-new risk/reward element to play. Battlefield structures, like destroyed peasant homes, are realistically destructible, and choosing the right tools for the job will be paramount – new units like the terrifying Soviet flamethrower are perfect for flushing enemy units out of cover.

Everything Relic is doing is building upon the solid core of *Company Of Heroes*, while adding yet more layers of emergent gameplay with its polished cover, suppression, line of sight mechanics and new units. But *COH2*'s amazing level of detail in the third iteration of Relic's Essence Engine is equally impressive. Battles look simply astounding as troops struggle through the ice, tanks rip into each other, bodies spin to the ground from the force of artillery hits, and the fires of wrecked vehicles reflect against the stark white of the snow.

With *Company Of Heroes 2*, Relic isn't just once again promising to take the RTS genre to new levels of gameplay depth and detail, but is shining a light on a lesser known but important part of the war. Those, to our minds, are both highly laudable aims that RTS fans should be excited about.

> "Part of what we wanted to do was create more authenticity, more realism and more tactical play for the player"
> QUINN DUFFY RELIC ENTERTAINMENT



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: US
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Relic Entertainment
Release: Q1 2013
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

It isn't a stretch to suggest that Relic Entertainment is one of the finest developers working in the RTS genre today. It not only pioneered and refined true squad-based RTS play in *Company Of Heroes*, but made innovative use of the *Warhammer 40K* licence for the epic *Dawn Of War* series.

Developer History

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War II **2009 [PC]**
Company Of Heroes **2006 [PC]**
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War **2004 [PC]**
Homeworld **1999 [PC]**

High Point

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War II saw Relic Entertainment successfully blend innovative hero-based RPG play with its trademark squad-based RTS mechanics in a deep, enjoyable and seamless way.



A FRESH START

AFTER *ASSASSIN'S Creed II*, the direction of the series was succumbing to feature-creep. With *ACIII*, Hutchinson saw an opportunity to reinvigorate the franchise and reinvent several core aspects. "It's hard to remove things when it's the same character and a direct continuation of the previous game, so having Connor and a clean slate let us step back," he explains. "I really believe each game should have its own unique elements that don't pass into the others; they should be part of a franchise, but they should be their own games with their own unique mechanics and stories."

Assassin's Creed III

CONCEPT Ubisoft has once again crafted an immersive open world in which players can slaughter the face off just about anyone between 1753 and 1783.

The revolution is coming

"**Time is our** biggest enemy," *Assassin's Creed III* creative director Alex Hutchinson tells **games™**. Frankly, it's a rather peculiar statement, given that time has been arguably the series' greatest strength to date.

Of course, Hutchinson isn't referring to the problems balancing historical fact with the franchise's bloody fiction, but rather the constraints Ubisoft Montreal has faced crafting a new world more expansive than those through which Altair and Ezio traipsed previously. Still, he marvels at the sheer depth of content featured in the game and how the sequel continues to evolve as development enters its last few weeks. "I'm amazed at how much we crammed into the game and how much is still coming online even now as we rush toward release," he adds.

Indeed, it's no understatement to say that *Assassin's Creed III* is steadily coming together as one of the most ambitious releases on the slate this year. And, huge world notwithstanding, the new period has afforded the studio the chance to delve into the era, exploring with care and reverence the myriad facets of warfare and everyday life that contribute to the fascinating epoch. *Brotherhood* and *Revelations* may have made admirable strides, but both felt iterative in stark comparison to the first two games. With a new setting, protagonist and historical focal point, it feels like a genuine revolution could be on the cards.



HOME SWEET HOME

WHILE *ASSASSIN'S Creed III* will mostly be about the killing, it'll also give a snapshot of life in the frontier and offer a more emotive perspective on the natives that populated the vast wilderness. We're not sure you'll be able to actually build snowmen yourself, but you can most likely kill them.

NAVAL GAZING

THE FOOTAGE so far released for the sea-based warfare has been nothing short of sensational, and the incredible level of detail that Ubisoft Singapore has implemented into the off-land portions of the game has staggered Hutchinson himself. "The dynamic water is amazing, switching from clear and calm seas to raging storms. It's the best water I've ever seen in a game," he gloats.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Wii U, Xbox 360
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: 31 October
Players: 1-TBA

Developer Profile

Ubisoft Montreal has perhaps been the most integral part of Ubisoft's success over the last decade. While originally formed to create kiddie distractions, the studio received an instant promotion to the big leagues when it released *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, which was soon followed by *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*. These days it's pretty busy with the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.

Developer History

Assassin's Creed Revelations **2011 [Multi]**
Assassin's Creed **2007 [Multi]**
Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time **2003 [Multi]**
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell **2002 [Multi]**

High Point

Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time not only breathed fresh life into a dormant franchise but reinvigorated the action-adventure genre with its glorious platforming.





■ Below: By keeping the action button held down after you jump, you can sprint for a limited period of time. You have to be careful not to jump too often, though, as a skilled player will tag you while you descend.

ROYAL CRUSH

OUT OF all the game modes that the beta has to offer – including the team-based Battle, where you have to capture the opposing team's flags, and the one-on-one Joust that limits the recharging capabilities of your rocket launcher – Royal is arguably the most frantic. It's effectively a free-for-all game of survival where the last man standing is the winner, and to give each round a sense of urgency, a central pillar in the middle of the map can be used to call in an electric fence. This will eat away at the surrounding play area until there's only a tiny circle left. It often comes down to three or four players with just a few metres of wiggle room.





■ Right: Instead of picking up and holding the laser, you can only use it in certain locations. Below: One of the community-created modes, called Sabotage, pays homage to Defuse in *Counter-Strike* and Search and Destroy in *Call Of Duty*. Teams take turns on offence and defence, and each player has one life.







■ Left: By pre-ordering *ShootMania* from **www.shootmania.com**, you can gain instant access to the beta. FYI, the French servers are always the busiest. Below: Launch pads are your best friend in terms of getting from A to B. They also litter most maps liberally.



ShootMania Storm

CONCEPT ■ A strictly multiplayer-only FPS that ditches military realism for the *Unreal Tournament*-style thrills of railguns and launch pads. You can also build your own maps.

Nadeo puts down the chequered flag before trying to recapture it

Way before recharging health, Last Stand perks and Gravity Guns, there was a time when the PC FPS scene was about firing without reloading, rocket jumps to anywhere and vaporising the opposition rather than filling them with different sized pieces of lead. It was a gaming era when the allure of the online deathmatch wasn't in unlocking customisation parts for your favourite firearm but instead in sprinting across the map while lining up one-shot kills in an instagib showdown. This is the type of multiplayer experience that Nadeo, the studio behind the excellent *TrackMania* series, is trying to rekindle.

As the first of three planned instalments that will be set in different environments, *ShootMania Storm* is a multiplayer-only FPS that's focused entirely on the act of running, jumping and gunning your way to victory. There are no classes or character customisation options to mull over – aside from adjusting the look of your back-mounted shield – and if the beta is any reflection of the final product, then the only guns you need master are a quick-firing rocket launcher that has minimal splash damage, a sticky grenade launcher that equips automatically whenever you go underground, and a laser that functions as a railgun.

You don't even have to worry about health or ammo pickups. Your gun automatically recharges when left alone for a few seconds, and if you take two hits from a rocket or one glance from a laser, you'll disintegrate before respawning back in the action. This is the fundamental premise of the free-for-all Melee mode, where the winner is determined by the most hits scored rather than out-and-out kills. But with eight official modes to choose from in addition to a comprehensive map editor, *ShootMania Storm* lets you tailor the action without the need for prior modding experience.

/// The simple map editor offers a basic Lego-style setup where you choose from a range of structures that neatly click together, whereas for players who like to build battlefields with a more personal touch, the advanced map editor starts you off with a variety of terrain-editing tools and a blank canvas. It's an elegant system that builds upon the community-nurturing focus of *TrackMania*, and although the beta was lacking the full range of map components for obvious reasons, it'll be interesting to see what proves popular and what doesn't when the full game finally releases.

What we can say with some certainty, however, is that *ShootMania* is designed to be eSports-friendly from the ground up. In particular, the Elite game mode pits one attacker armed with a laser and three armour points against three defenders equipped with rocket launchers. Both sides can win by wiping out the opposition, while the attacker can steal victory by capturing a flag post. It's an easy mode to spectate as each game lasts exactly six rounds, each round lasts no longer than a minute, and the only character you need to focus on is the trigger-happy attacker.

But while Elite is all about the three-on-three skirmishes, *ShootMania* can theoretically support up to 255 players on a single server. Given the limitations of modern bandwidth, its unlikely this lofty figure will be reached any time soon, but as a reflection of Nadeo's open-ended and forward-thinking approach to FPS development, it's clear that *ShootMania* is built with longevity in mind. We even got to play one match that hemmed us in with 70 other opponents on a player-created map. Suffice to say that dodging the ceaseless barrage of rocket fire was akin to playing *Gradius* from a cockpit perspective.

> "We're showing the way to eSports, and with the creation tools, we're putting the power in the community's hands"
> EDOUARD BEAUCHEMIN NADEO

As it stands, *ShootMania* is shaping up to be a bouncy FPS that's refreshingly light on gimmicks. There's no single-player element outside of making new maps, no on-screen gun to wave around menacingly, and no fancy reload animations. It's just you, a hovering pair of crosshairs, and a map full of online mouse warriors who want to vaporise each other with purple rockets and red lightning bolts.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: France
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Nadeo
Release: Q4 2012
Genre: First-person shooter
Players: 1-255

Developer Profile

After working on sailing series *Virtual Skipper*, Nadeo found acclaim with *TrackMania* – a racing game that encouraged players to build their own tracks. Development director Florent Castelnérac evolved the series with numerous expansions and a sequel before Ubisoft acquired Nadeo in 2009.

Developer History

TrackMania 2: Canyon **2011 [PC]**
TrackMania United **2006 [PC]**
TrackMania **2003 [PC]**
Virtual Skipper **2000 [PC]**

High Point

There may be over ten versions to choose from, but *TrackMania United Forever* is the clear winner. It amalgamates all the content from the first games into one convenient download.

1 DEADPOOL'S PREFERENCE for self-referential cheekiness is already off to a good start. The press release for the game is written in the voice(s) of the character, claiming that he himself designed it and forced High Moon to develop, while the teaser trailer, which debuted at San Diego Comic-Con, kicked off with a relaxed introduction from Deadpool himself.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Activision
Developer: High Moon Studios
Release: TBA
Players: 1

Developer Profile

One of the many mid-sized studios under the Activision umbrella, High Moon Studios is a confident, though relatively untested, developer best known for its range of licensed action games. Though it has never achieved great critical success, its games are always decent, suggesting that the studio may be capable of excellence in the future.

Developer History

Transformers: Dark Of The Moon **2011 [Multi]**
Transformers: War For Cybertron **2010 [Multi]**
The Bourne Conspiracy **2008 [Multi]**
Darkwatch **2005 [Multi]**

High Point

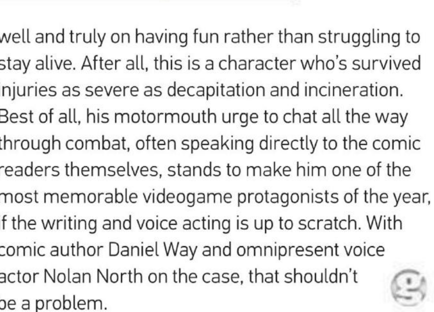
All of High Moon's games are fairly middling. To the point where we're tempted to say that the *Deadpool* teaser trailer is the studio's high point to date.

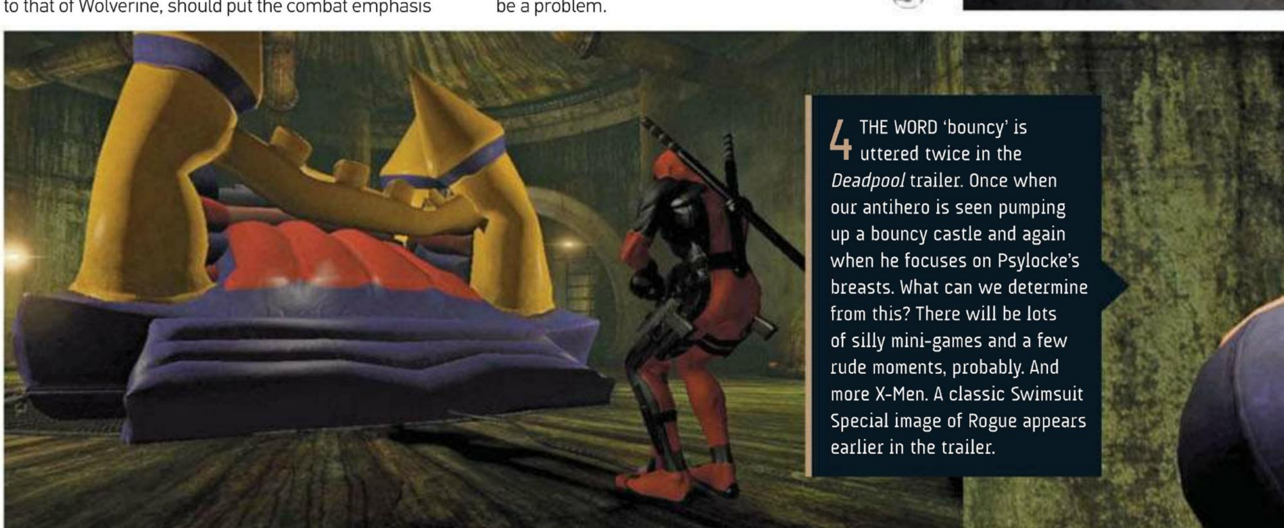
Deadpool

CONCEPT ■ A standard action game, mixing melee and shooting elements, but made much more than that by its protagonist, one of the most unusual and funny characters in Marvel comics.

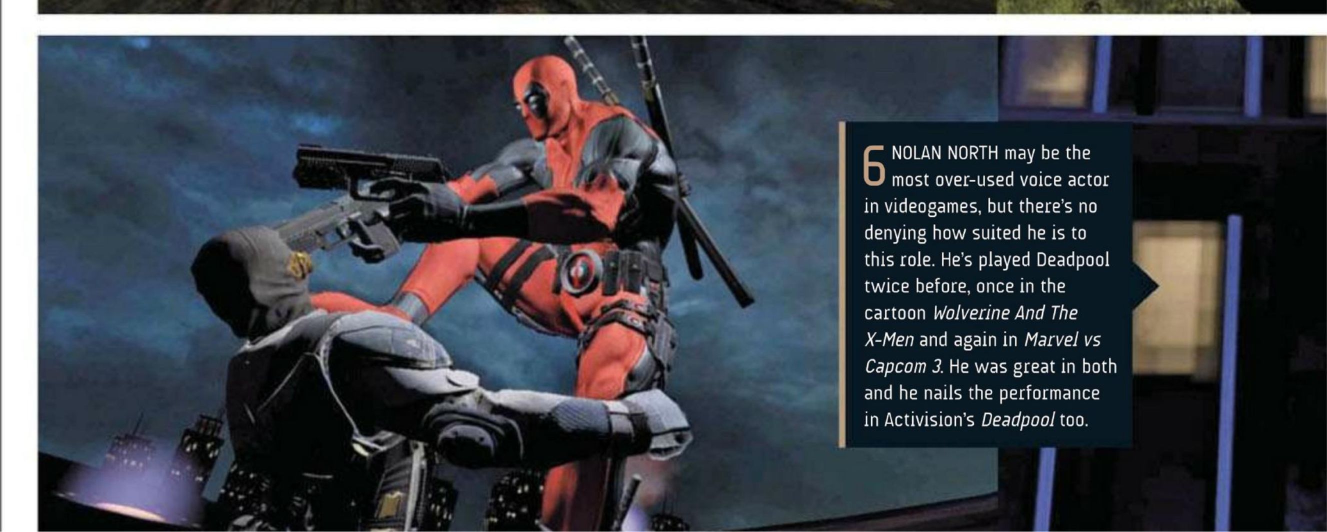
Can Marvel's wisecracking antihero outdo Bayonetta?

Of all the Marvel comic characters Activision could have chosen to adapt into videogame form, Deadpool is not the one we would have guessed first. We probably still wouldn't have guessed right after 100 attempts actually, such is the relative obscurity of the *X-Men* antagonist. Not that we're complaining. Deadpool is a fantastic character and perfect for videogame adaptation. His proficiency with guns and swords slots him neatly into the *Devil May Cry* template, while his healing factor, very similar to that of Wolverine, should put the combat emphasis well and truly on having fun rather than struggling to stay alive. After all, this is a character who's survived injuries as severe as decapitation and incineration. Best of all, his motormouth urge to chat all the way through combat, often speaking directly to the comic readers themselves, stands to make him one of the most memorable videogame protagonists of the year, if the writing and voice acting is up to scratch. With comic author Daniel Way and omnipresent voice actor Nolan North on the case, that shouldn't be a problem.





4 THE WORD 'bouncy' is uttered twice in the *Deadpool* trailer. Once when our antihero is seen pumping up a bouncy castle and again when he focuses on Psylocke's breasts. What can we determine from this? There will be lots of silly mini-games and a few rude moments, probably. And more X-Men. A classic Swimsuit Special image of Rogue appears earlier in the trailer.



6 NOLAN NORTH may be the most over-used voice actor in videogames, but there's no denying how suited he is to this role. He's played Deadpool twice before, once in the cartoon *Wolverine And The X-Men* and again in *Marvel vs Capcom 3*. He was great in both and he nails the performance in Activision's *Deadpool* too.





2 IF NOTHING else, High Moon and the creative talents of writer Daniel Way and voice actor Nolan North have nailed the tone of Deadpool perfectly. He quips constantly throughout the trailer, talks to the other voices in his head and persistently teases the audience. At one point he turns to the camera and says: "Let's be honest. I'm not the only one with a little bit of shit in my pants now, am I?" He's right.





3 HUMOUR WILL only get *Deadpool* so far, and this really needs to be a good game if it can hope to compete with the likes of *Metal Gear Rising* or *DmC*. Footage suggests a fast and frantic combat style with the flexibility to throw in lots of different special moves and context-sensitive actions. The signs are good, though we do have doubts about whether High Moon has the chops for it.





5 SOME OF the gameplay in *Deadpool* looks pretty innovative for the action genre. Dynamic camera angles mimic the wide variety of 'shots' seen in comics, while one moment seems to suggest that finishing moves will literally break the fourth wall of the TV screen, but other moments, like an on-rails shooting bit, sadly hint at moments of mundanity.





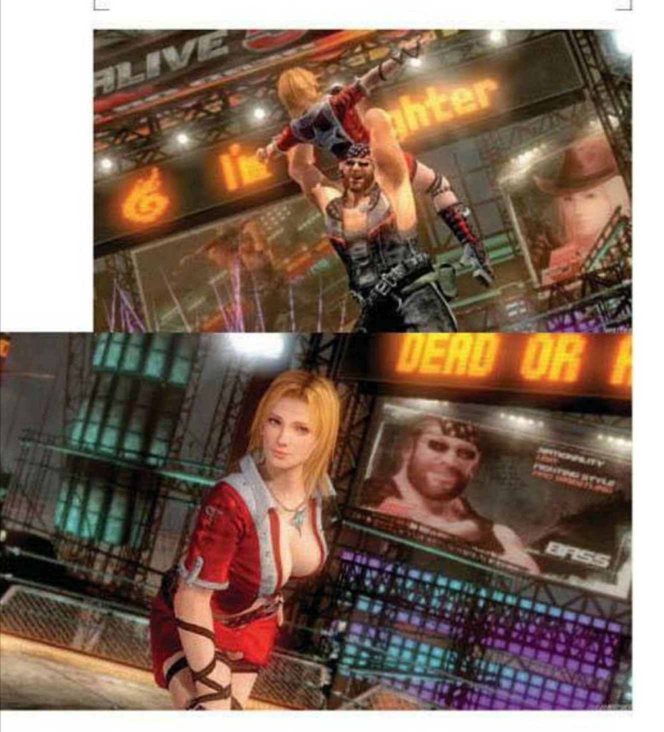
7 SO WHY is Activision making a *Deadpool* game? High Moon's Peter Della Penna explains. "Deadpool came by the studio one day, said he was taking over, and that if I didn't hire Marvel writer Daniel Way pronto and make the most amazing *Deadpool* videogame, he'd break both of our arms and beat us to death with them." Fair enough.

Dead Or Alive 5

CONCEPT Heavily based around the counters system, *Dead Or Alive 5* now introduces a power system, allowing you to slam your opponents into the environment.

Back to basics for Team Ninja...

Below: Chain throws are a big part of Bass and Tina's game, leaving you to guess which direction they're going to take the throw in as you attempt to break free.



Above: While it's not completely abandoning the look that has defined previous games, overall the sex appeal of the game has been toned down, hopefully allowing the gameplay to shine through.

Dead Or Alive has never been treated fairly. Even in a fighting genre that had *Mortal Kombat* and *Arcana Heart 3* being misunderstood due to their visuals and own history rather than their gameplay, Team Ninja's series has been an easy target. Too button bashy. No skill needed. And pervy too, a situation not helped when former producer Tomonobu Itagaki emphasised the bouncy assets of the female fighters when players set their age as high as possible. According to *Dead Or Alive*, 99-year-old players deserved to watch the biggest breasts of all bouncing around.

Even so, *Dead Or Alive 4* sold well owing to the lack of choice at the Xbox 360's launch, but there are no such luxuries now, with the fighting genre having flourished since then. A lot changes in six years, so it's surprising to see Yosuke Hayashi, the man charged with righting the Team Ninja ship following Itagaki's departure, refusing to tweak or change the formula too much for *Dead Or Alive 5*. Entirely understandable following the disastrous *Ninja Gaiden 3*, but it's still an unexpected approach.

Dead Or Alive 5 remains anchored around its trademark counter system, like its predecessors. You can throw out attempts to parry an opponent's arms or legs at any time, as long as you're not being juggled in the air. Even if you're reeling in hit stun from an attack, you can snap out of your hurt animation with a parry attempt. Guess right and you counter your opponent and the momentum is yours. Guess wrong and the damage scale resets in favour of your opponent, so you take more damage.

/// The genius of *Dead Or Alive 5* is how well this system works. Most 3D fighters have a combo system that involves hitting your opponent into the air and then following up with attacks while they can't defend themselves. This is also an option in *DOA5*, but just as valid are the longer ground combos and extended pressure from block strings, a deliberate choice to tempt panicked counter attempts from your opponent. At a basic button-bashing level, it means you never feel trapped, as you always have an emergency option to stop what your opponent is doing and feel like you've picked up a smart read on his playing style. At a high level, you start deliberately cutting off your own combos and predictable strings to bait out the counter attempt. It's a delicately balanced system that deserves more credit

> "We wanted to show our approach on how to push the genre forward"
> YOHEI SHIMBORI TEAM NINJA



NO DLC CHARACTERS

IT'S BECOMING a bigger topic in fighting games following the outcry when Capcom locked 12 characters on the disc for *Street Fighter X Tekken*, to be sold later as DLC. Yet it seems that the fighting genre is heading in the right direction, with *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* offering DLC characters without charging for them, while *Dead Or Alive 5* is going one better and promising to not offer them at all. The reason? Balance. Hayashi has said it's hard enough to balance the game with all the present characters without having to account for extra faces, which players may or may not have.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Tecmo Koei
Developer: Team Ninja
Release: 28 September
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Team Ninja made its name with the *Ninja Gaiden* and *Dead Or Alive* series, and also the controversy when eccentric producer Tomonobu Itagaki left the studio in June 2008 amid a flurry of lawsuits and insults thrown Tecmo's way. Yosuke Hayashi has been the man to take the reins since.

Developer History

Dead Or Alive 3
2001 [Xbox]
Dead Or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball
2003 [Xbox]
Ninja Gaiden
2004 [Xbox]
Ninja Gaiden II
2008 [Xbox 360]

High Point

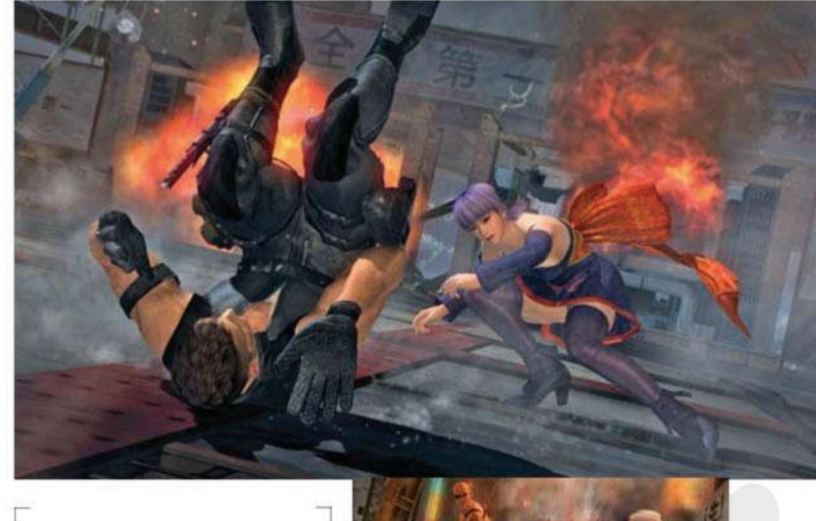
Crushingly difficult and gorgeous to look at, *Ninja Gaiden* is still celebrated as one of the hardest games ever made, the twitch hack-and-slash counterpart to the thoughtful attacks and strategy of *Dark Souls*.

than it gets, especially as it has given *Dead Or Alive* its own identity.

While returning characters have been gifted extra moves, the core game plan hasn't changed too much for this fifth outing. Tina still wants to lock her opponent in chain throws, Bayman has a lethal ground game, Ayane has her awkward back-turned mix-ups, and Zack continues to make little sense to newcomers with his eccentric dancing and swaying throwing off counter timing. Akira is the biggest surprise here – he's maintained his *Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown* moves list right down to the inputs and guard breaks. He doesn't have the same flowing attack strings as the rest of the cast do, but as in *Virtua Fighter*, Akira is a brutal powerhouse who runs over his opponent with raw strength. Even the same combos work, by and large.

However, there's little new here in terms of pure gameplay mechanics, and that is the biggest disappointment. Stage interactivity has become a bigger part of the game, with walls offering extra damage such as the pinball bumpers in the big top and the missile strikes that can be triggered in the war zone stage by slamming your opponent against the wall. The power strike is the main addition to each fighter's moves list, but it's essentially a delayed move and, bar the bonus cinematic for landing it, such moves were already present in the game. Even so, in aesthetic terms, it's an obvious crowd pleaser.

And that's the key to *Dead Or Alive 5*'s appeal. Stages collapse and tilt as the battle progresses, fighters scrub up with dirt and sweat, and even for a Team Ninja game, the animation is incredible. It's a gorgeous game. Hopefully, though, this time round its easy looks won't distract from the intriguing gameplay underneath the surface.



Above: Fighters become dirtier as they get slammed around on the ground and end up sweating as the battle continues.
Right: The animation between moves is seamless and remains a trademark of Team Ninja's brawler.



Above: The section we played had us following an almost *Modern Warfare*-style AI companion who led the way as the narrative unfolded. The game uses your partner to great effect as you go into set piece combat.

Metro: Last Light

CONCEPT 4A Games returns to the dark world of *Metro 2033* to give the concept greater polish and a deeper sense of atmosphere.

Coming out into the light

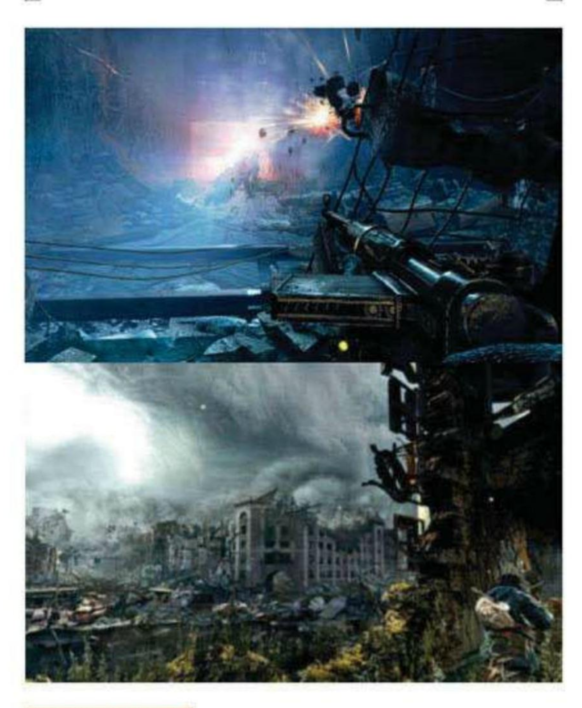
There are very few second chances in triple-A gaming. Given the cost of development, it's increasingly rare for a game that's anything less than a hit to get a sequel, leaving many middling games as one-shot wonders. While it was a refreshing take on the FPS, framed in a dark, post-apocalyptic world with oodles of brooding Eastern European flavour, you'd have been forgiven for assuming the good but not great *Metro 2033* might be one of them. Despite the confusion caused by some of its more esoteric ideas like ammo as currency and some rough edges to its gameplay, however, its ruined world of human survivors trapped underground and hunted by mutated monsters just resonated with gamers.

So its sequel in *Metro: Last Light* was welcome news in a genre packed with *Call Of Duty* copycats, and with it 4A Games is bringing a whole new level of polish and immersion to the experience. While *Last Light* seems to be leaning a little closer to some of the genre norms, this is still very much a more open fusion of hard-hitting FPS combat and stealth gameplay. There are even heavier nods towards survival horror, and it promises a return of the previous game's light RPG elements.

Our time with *Last Light* saw Artyom, the returning protagonist from the first game, and a companion foraging on the slowly warming surface. What stands out is how 4A Games is using both the dark environment and mechanics focused around its first-person nature to create a greater sense of immersion. The need to use your gas mask and juggle its filters makes a return from the first game – despite the signs of life, the air above ground is still highly poisonous – but has more depth. Not only do you have to keep switching your filters as they run out, but your mask is affected by the environment. In battles against horrible, mutated enemies it can be cracked, leaving you peering through silvery glass spider webs, while blood, gore and water splatter and run realistically across your vision.

> "One of our major goals in Metro is just to immerse the player in this game world"
> HUW BEYNON THQ

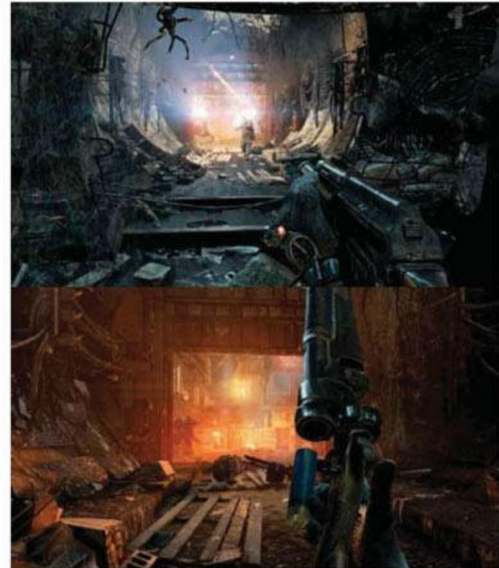
/// These things add tension to sections that see us stealthily avoiding packs of wolf-like Watchers, and thanks to some impressive visuals, it's easy to get caught up in the moment. But *Metro: Last Light* isn't limited to just tricks with ambience. Scouting the surface, we come across a crashed plane



DARK BEAUTY

4A Games' bespoke graphical technology in the 4A Engine is a big part of what makes *Metro: Last Light* so impressive to look at. The build we saw was running on a high-end PC rig and was graphically gorgeous. That applies to details both large and small, like the amazing surface world, which is starting to thaw out of nuclear winter, with vegetation slowly reappearing in the ruins of the city and occasional sunlight peeking out of the grey clouds. The little details, like setting fire to cobwebs with your lighter or removing spiders that are crawling over your mask in a smear of guts, are equally effective in helping bring the world to life.





INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin:
Ukraine
Publisher:
THQ
Developer:
4A Games
Release:
Q1 2013
Genre:
First-person shooter
Players:
1

Developer Profile

4A Games is a Ukrainian studio, partly comprised of developers who previously worked at GSC Game World, the developer behind *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl*. The members of the new 4A Games, led by Oles Shyskovtsov and Oleksandr Maksymchuk, who had helped program the X-Ray engine used in the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series, went on to create their own 4A Engine. The studio used it in its first game, *Metro 2033*, which was based on the novel by Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky.

High Point

Metro 2033 was 4A Games' first release, and it was notable for a strong mix of immersive atmosphere and an interesting take on some of its FPS mechanics. Despite its strengths, however, it wasn't as polished as it might have been.

and encounter a new psychic phenomenon flooding the Metro. It instantly throws us into a vision of the past, and we're suddenly witnessing the nuclear destruction of Moscow from the crashing aircraft. The terrifying scene causes our companion to remove his mask in disoriented panic, but being gifted with psychic resistance, we're unaffected and able to talk him down, saving his life. Clearly moments like this will allow 4A Games to flesh out the origin of the world to great effect.

But few things better showcase *Last Light*'s greater polish than its combat. You once again wield the esoteric, homespun weapon types that have been cobbled together from pre-war weapons and random junk, but they've an enhanced sense of weight and kick. You'll need that firepower, too, as swarms of enemies attack, and there are some nasty new ones, such as a huge bat-like creature that swoops down and grabs us in its claws, flying us through the air. It's only by using a powerful new sniper rifle – still trying to save ammo, which is again currency – that we can knock him out of the sky.

Pacing also appears to be one of *Last Light*'s strengths as we flee a slavering horde of mutated dogs into the nearby shelter of a Metro station. These sorts of sequences are scripted, but they still manage to keep a sense of freedom given the sandbox nature of our weapons set, and are certainly frightening – it's a genuine relief when the doors of the Metro open and a bunch of flamethrower-wielding survivors save us from being overwhelmed and devoured.

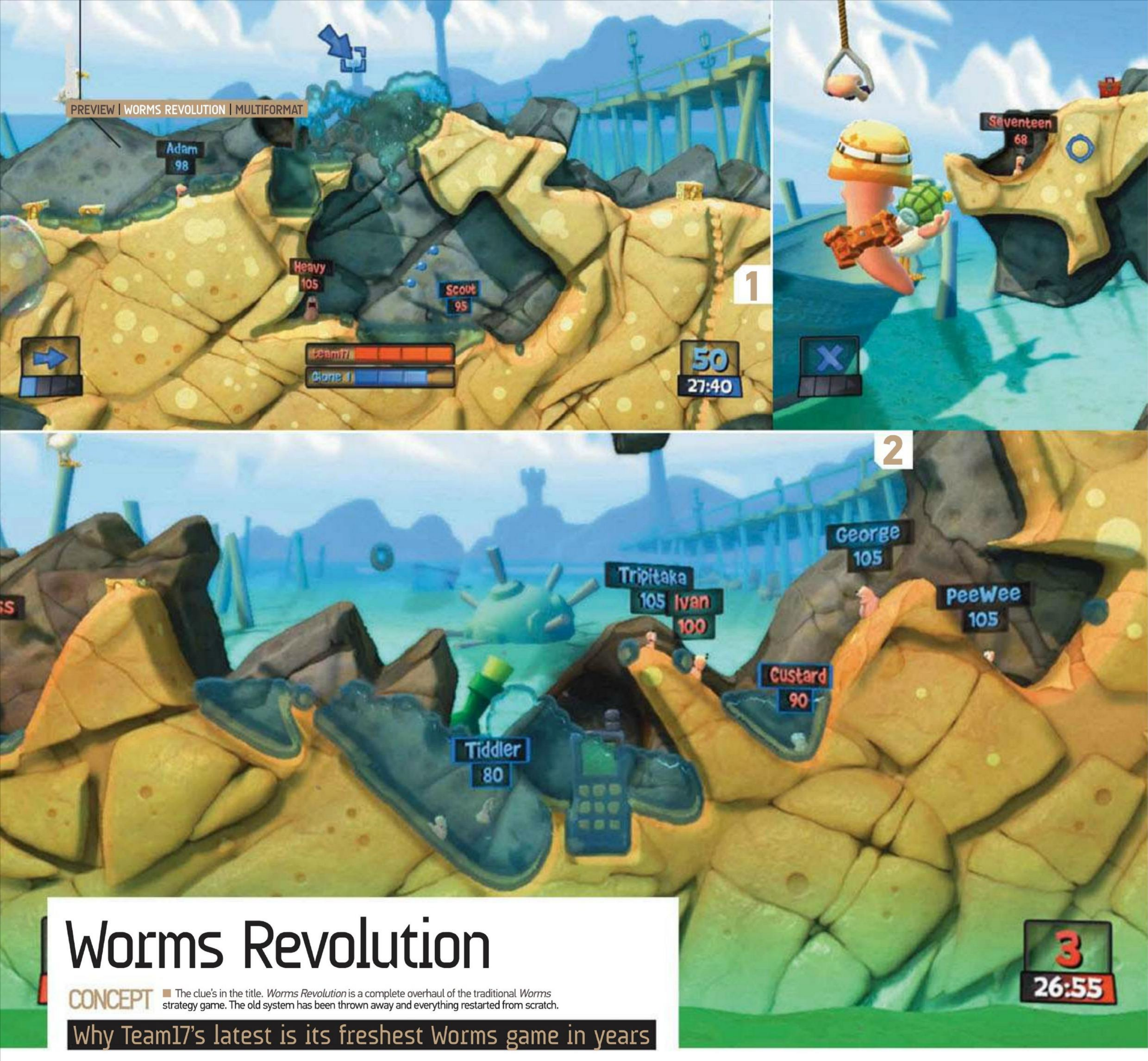
With *Metro: Last Light*, 4A Games is proving why some ideas deserve a second chance, and if its atmosphere, pacing and more polished play all comes together, this game could be a surprise treat in 2013.

Below: Your makeshift weapon collection is set to return, but you have a greater variety of tools to use in the shooter sandbox and everything feels more solid and effective in combat. You'll still need to be mindful of just how you approach combat, as bullets are currency and a precious resource.





Above: The first *Metro* game had some interesting brooding outdoor environments, but in *Last Light* they have far more variety, as the world is slowly starting to recover from nuclear winter. How much scope there will be for exploration remains to be seen.



Worms Revolution

CONCEPT ■ The clue's in the title. *Worms Revolution* is a complete overhaul of the traditional *Worms* strategy game. The old system has been thrown away and everything restarted from scratch.

Why Team17's latest is its freshest Worms game in years

If you think Activision makes new *Call Of Duty* games at an alarming rate then spare a thought for Team17. Since 1995, the UK-based studio has created around 19 different *Worms* games, give or take a couple of mobile phone titles and a little-known Korean web game, averaging out at more than one per year. You'd think it would be hard to introduce new ideas on such a frequent basis and, to the untrained eye, that's exactly the way it seems. With *Worms Revolution*, however, the developer is making its most obvious attempt yet to bring new ideas to the long-running strategy series without throwing away the aspects that have always made it fun.

While previous 2D entries in the series have built upon the iterations that came before them, making certain editions hard to tell apart from the last, *Worms Revolution* has thrown everything away and started completely from scratch. There's a new art style at long last, a brand new physics engine, and tons of content and gameplay ideas that have never been used before. Here are just a few of them…

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS3, Xbox 360
Origin: UK
Publisher: Warner Bros
Developer: Team17
Release: 10 October
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Team17 is defined by its willingness to evolve. It was formed by a group of shareware devs in 1991 and originally specialised in Amiga before going multiformat in the late Nineties, then moved into work-for-hire console development and, more recently, reinvented itself as a purely digital developer.

Developer History

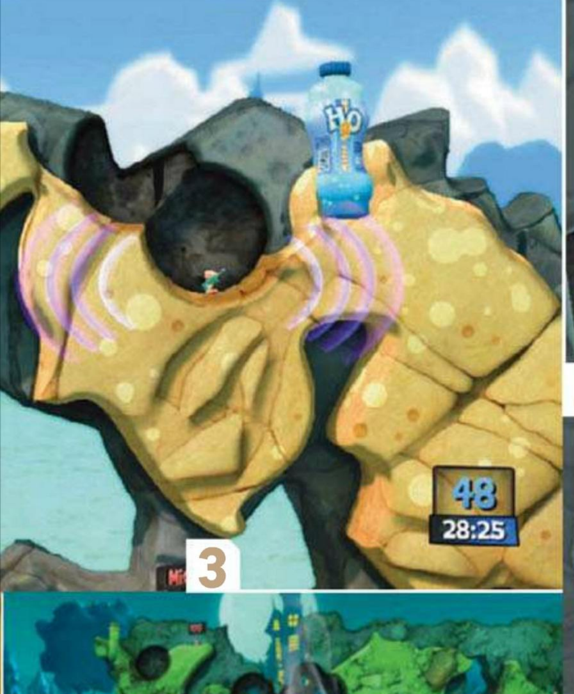
Alien Breed **2012 [iOS]**
Worms Crazy Golf **2011 [Multi]**
Lemmings **2006 [Multi]**
The Speris Legacy **1996 [Multi]**
Qwak **1993 [Amiga]**

High Point

Team17's long-running *Worms* and *Alien Breed* series are its greatest achievements. But its single best game? Probably the ultra-comprehensive download game *Worms 2: Armageddon*.

1 A WHOLE NEW LOOK

IF THE visual style of *Worms Revolution* can be summed up in just a few words, it's *Worms 3D* but in 2D. To clarify, while *Worms* games of the past have either been 3D or 2D, Team17's new game engine allows it to make a classic-feeling 2D *Worms* game but with polygon-based visuals reminiscent of its 3D entries. For starters, this allows much more detail to be used in the character models, enabling a greater range of expressions on the worms' faces as well as a variety of character models to give them more distinct personalities. But it also allows for new types of physics too…





“We needed to evolve the gameplay some more, and we thought, ‘Why not actually change the core worm itself?’” KELVIN ASTON TEAM17





2 NEW PHYSICS

PHYSICS IS the backbone of any *Worms* game, from the trajectory of a rocket launch to the bounce of a grenade or the arc of a worm as it's knocked flying by an explosion. *Worms* basically *is* physics. So it's great that the 3D engine allows even more things to happen. Physical objects are no longer parts of the landscape but have their own properties, and they can be interacted with and respond to the effects of battle. Water can spill out from busted bottles, for example, causing all sorts of chaos, while gas canisters can be shot to release their toxic contents.

3 NEW WEAPONS (OF COURSE)

EVERY *WORMS* game needs new weapons, although we can think of at least one that removed them, so *Worms Revolution* will have its fair share alongside the old favourites. One made possible by the new graphics engine is BoggyB, a special worm who will rappel down the front of the screen and throw a powerful grenade into the action. Team17 tells us it's especially useful for combating 'dark side' players, so we assume it offers enough accuracy to aim straight at worms who have dug themselves underground. The new dynamic water has also been incorporated into some weapons.

4 THE CLASS SYSTEM

WHILE CUSTOMISATION has been a big part of *Worms* for years, and will continue to be evolved here – you can now equip trinkets that worms will play with when idle, for instance – the introduction of a class system changes things on a gameplay level. Soldier, Scout, Scientist and Heavy classes exist, a bit like *Team Fortress*. And like that game, each class has distinct strengths and weaknesses. The Scout, for example, can dig tunnels so small that no one else can follow him. A punch from the Heavy, however, will send the victim flying much further. A potential game-changer.

5 LESS-ANNOYING VOICES

SICK OF hearing the same old worms squeal out the same old catchphrases? So are we. And so is Team17, it seems. The developer has changed speech banks so that each phrase has a number of alternatives to randomly draw from, significantly increasing the variety of chatter. Even better is the news that Matt Berry (*Garth Marenghi's Darkplace*, *The IT Crowd*) has recorded a commentary, in character as a nature doc maker observing the behaviour of the worms from afar. Funny? Judge for yourself by watching the preview video at **gamestm.co.uk/?p=6750**

FIFA 13

CONCEPT ■ You'd be forgiven for not realising by now, but *FIFA* is something of a big deal. It's basically the biggest football game in the world.

Can FIFA 13 improve on last season's performance?

The bitter war of attrition that rages eternally between *FIFA* and *PES* took a back seat last year when *FIFA 12* fought an internal battle with its own divisive gameplay tweaks. You couldn't really fault anyone who struggled to navigate around the sim's latest innovation: Tactical Defending, a new, manual-focused defending mode that appeared to require prescient timing.

Nevertheless, the old system still existed as 'legacy defending', so Tactical Defending escaped without too much of a fan upset – most players simply chose to switch the fussy mode off. With defence buffed last year, then, *FIFA 13* turns its gaze towards improving the attacking game. In usual *FIFA* fashion, prepare for a swath of alterations big and small, focused in this annual instalment on providing more variety in the end game and avoiding typical '*FIFA* goal' conclusions – two passes in the defensive half, through ball to left wing, squared into the box and strike.

Team AI is more aggressive, making runs two steps ahead, curving their movements and creating scenarios that should enable players to open up the opposition's defence. Bolstering this aspect is the First Touch mechanic that ostensibly adds another random element to the on-pitch play. Instead of players nonchalantly receiving the most awkward of passes, First Touch ensures that each pass – depending on distance, player stats, angle and so on – will have more precise outcomes. As lead gameplay producer Aaron McHardy discusses with **games™**, the core ethos at EA Canada is to implement new features that enhance the central mechanics, without complicating the control scheme.

"We have a philosophy on how we design the features in *FIFA*. We use a lot of context in a lot of the match situations, so although we're putting more and more features in, we're not adding more and more button combos," he says, before explaining the evolution of Precision Dribbling. "The amount of new features and controls is not increasing year on year, but the depth and level of engagement is increasing. So if you take things like Complete Dribbling, the whole idea about Complete Dribbling is that we had Precision Dribbling, we had skill dribble, regular dribble, and all these kinds of dribble. We wanted to get them to happen on context, on the left stick, so it actually removes some of that problem of over-complexity and adding more substance."

/// It's now possible to ghost around players *PES*-style without too much right-stick fiddling, using pace and direction to best your opponent. It's an encouragingly streamlined approach to gameplay enhancements, but there are bound to be concerns over whether these features are tailored to the higher-level game. There's little doubt that this approach is valid, but by overhauling the moment-to-moment play with precision inputs, there's always the risk that these improvements will nullify the use of lower-tier teams. It's a concern that McHardy addresses.

"I think you are starting to see differences between teams through features like First Touch Control," he explains. "Ball control means a whole lot more [this time around] and you get differentiation [between players]. You get your Lionel Messis with impeccable touch. They're going to take the ball down better than your Shrewsbury players; they're not going to be able to cope with those difficult situations like the Barcelona players."

> "I'm not worried about alienating people based on adding features. We're creating more depth"
> AARON MCHARDY EA

What McHardy doesn't say is that the feature is just as beneficial to the lower-ranked teams as it is the cream of the crop. While you won't be seeing as much flair on the pitch, the mechanics demand players rethink their style, challenging them to consider movements, passing and attacks based on the skill of the team and the player.

It certainly feels like this year's *FIFA* has a bit more room to breathe. The game seems less predictable, open to more variables. But perhaps the most surprising response to the new features is that it makes you reassess last year's Tactical Defending. With attacking augmented by a multitude of mechanics tailored around player strategy, Tactical Defending complements this revised approach to the forward play. *FIFA* is once again making drastic improvements, but this year it seems to have an eye for the bigger game.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS, iOS, Mac, PC, PlayStation 3, PSP, PS Vita, Wii, Wii U, Xbox 360
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: EA Canada
Release: 28 September
Genre: Sports
Players: 1-TBA

FIFA Profile

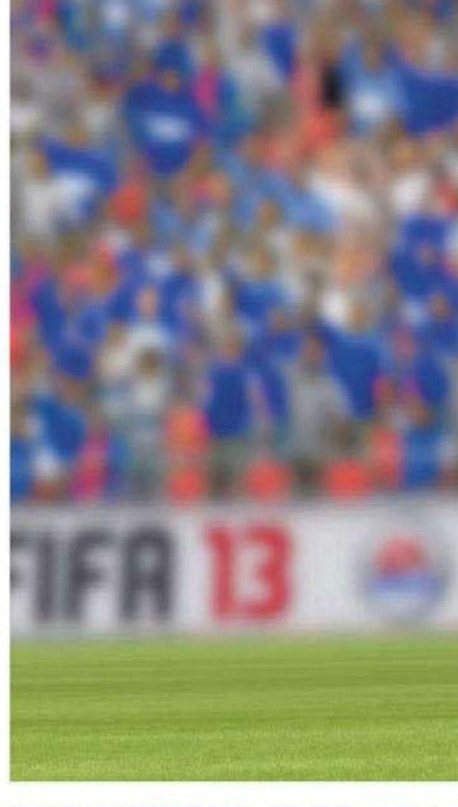
From the 2D sprites sprinting across a 3D stadium in the early Nineties to the crude polygonal models later in the decade, *FIFA* has come a long way since its humble beginnings. Now the true titan of football titles, it overcame the mid-decade drought of creativity with the superb *FIFA 10* to secure the top team licences and overhaul gameplay. It's the undisputed league champion.

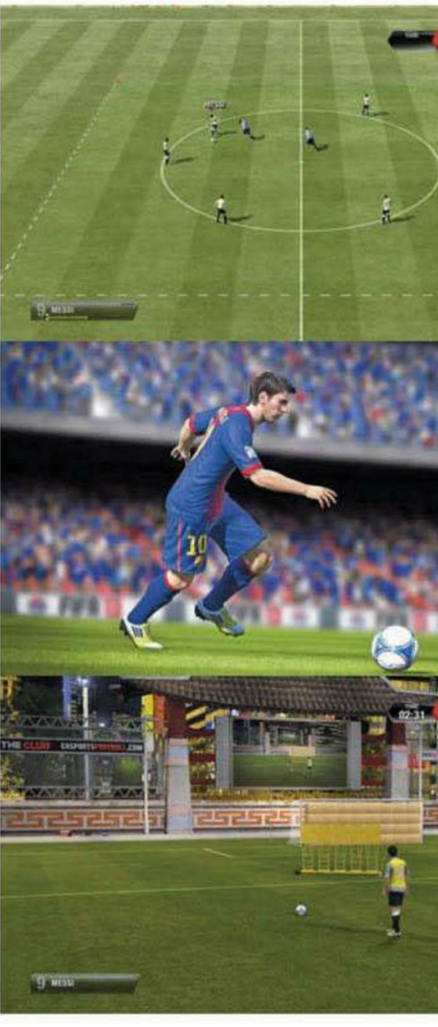
Developer History

FIFA 12 **2011 [Multi]**
FIFA 10 **2009 [Multi]**
FIFA 97 **1996 [Multi]**
FIFA International Soccer **1993 [Multi]**

High Point

FIFA 10 marked the turning point in the series with an overhauled engine and an extended Manager mode.





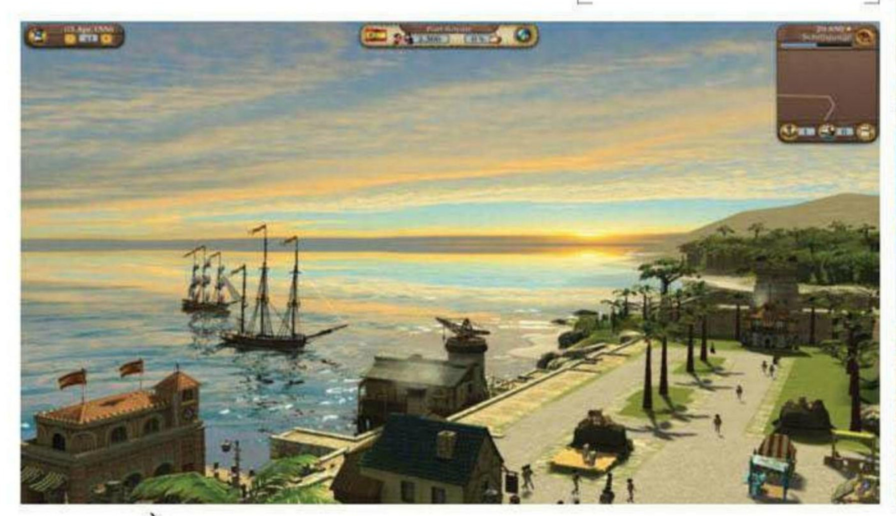
■ Right: While *FIFA 13* isn't quite there yet, expect *14* to accurately re-create players mumbling and forgetting the words to their own national anthems.



■ Above: Lionel Messi is *FIFA 13*'s mascot this year. EA paid top money to poach him away from rival footie sim *PES*, so expect him to be plastered over every imaginable piece of marketing material for the foreseeable future. Below: There are plenty of skill games to distract players. It's worth investing time into these modes, given the subtlety of the new dribbling and passing mechanics.

OFF THE PITCH

FIFA ISN'T all about kicking the ball around. EA has promised big improvements to the game off the turf, improving the career mode so it isn't so shoddy. Transfers have been given a bit more care, ensuring that baffling player moves are stomped out, and negotiations have been changed to better represent the ups and downs of the real-life equivalent. For example, promises will be made to potential new players when making deals, and market values dips and dives with form, while elsewhere you'll find yourself setting up player moves with a cash incentive. It's by no means perfect, but it does iron out a few creases present in the last couple of iterations.





The PC will be getting its own version of *Pirates & Merchants*, bringing over all the improvements made for the console game.

Port Royale 3: Pirates & Merchants

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Germany
Publisher: Kalypso Media
Developer: Gaming Minds Studios
Release: September 2012
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

German developer Gaming Minds Studios is comprised of a development team that was formerly part of the long-standing Ascaron Entertainment until it was acquired by Kalypso Media in 2009. Many of Ascaron's franchises, including *Patrician* and *Port Royale*, were part of the acquisition, and the new team continues to specialise in simulation-based strategy games.

Developer History

Patrician IV: Rise Of A Dynasty **2011 [PC]**
Patrician IV: Conquest By Trade **2010 [PC]**
Darkstar One: Broken Alliance **2006 [360]**

High Point

Despite fatal flaws *Darkstar One: Broken Alliance* was a brave attempt to fuse space combat and trading in a game very reminiscent of *Wing Commander: Privateer* and *Freelancer*.

CONCEPT Gaming Minds Studios attempts to introduce console players to the joys of cutthroat piracy on the high seas and sound economic management on land in *Port Royale 3*.

Winning on the high seas... by any means necessary

Hybrids can be funny things. All too often attempts to fuse the strengths of two very different genres can leave them disproportionately balanced – very strong on one side, but weak on the other. Interestingly, the pirates that roamed the waters of the Caribbean in the 17th Century and served as the inspiration for *Port Royale 3: Pirates & Merchants* exemplify that. Their modified trading ships crewed by bloodthirsty former soldiers were speedy predators of merchant shipping. But they usually lacked the firepower or discipline to take on the bigger ships and professional sailors of the major European navies – a disparity eventually leading to their demise.

Developer Gaming Minds Studios is very familiar with blending different genre elements in the *Port Royale* series, and balancing real-time *Sid Meier's Pirates!*-style ship combat with deep economic management of a chain of Caribbean islands. Until now, however, its strength has been on the sim side, which appeals to a PC niche but isn't quite as attractive to console gamers. So as the franchise comes to consoles, Gaming Minds is attempting to make the action and cerebral halves of *Port Royale 3* equally attractive and more accessible.

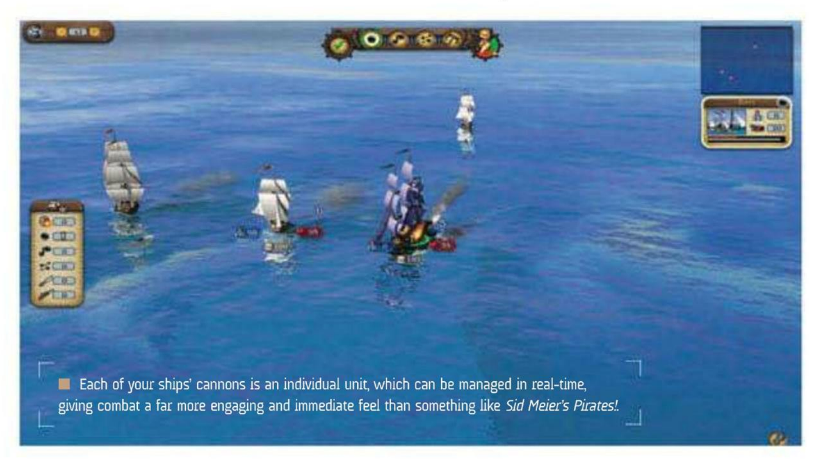
Port Royale 3 is split into two campaigns: an Adventurer campaign and a Trader campaign. The former, more action-based half will see your fleets roaming the seas, capturing booty by terrorising shipping, while the latter has you trading your way to success. But you can still use bloody piracy or buy your way to victory with sly management in either campaign.

Pirate ship combat is based around direct joypad inputs on consoles, and you can actually control individual ships or whole fleets as needed. There's a thrilling amount of detail as you zoom in on battles and watch your cannons blow enemy ships apart, flinging little pirates on their decks to a watery grave. The economics are also more engaging, tasking you with hauling cargo from island to island, driving up prices with clever trading tactics. As well as being able to develop towns, you can build special structures, depending on your levels of notoriety as a pirate.

> "There's a thrilling amount of detail as you zoom in on battles and watch your cannons blow enemy ships apart"

Just as importantly, it's looking like the developer has worked hard to optimise sim controls for consoles – not an easy task, given that the PC version made full use of a keyboard – and is making a great deal of the economic and combat micromanagement automated if you don't want to deal with it too much. So you'll be able to play *Port Royale 3* as you prefer, but still have scope to learn new mechanics.

Overall, it's looking like the extra development time on *Port Royale 3*'s console version is giving Gaming Minds the time to polish the flaws of its PC offering and better appeal to console gamers. Whether it can fully balance out this particular hybrid so it can sail choppy console waters without listing one way or the other remains to be seen, but we're hopeful.



Each of your ships' cannons is an individual unit, which can be managed in real-time, giving combat a far more engaging and immediate feel than something like *Sid Meier's Pirates!*.

■ Left: Monsters will be able to ambush you, and both use and destroy the environment to get to you. Below: Combat in *Monster Hunter 4* will be far more movement-based than ever before, as you scale the environment and climb on monsters.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
Release: Q3 2013 (Japan)
Players: 1-4

Ryozo Tsujimoto Profile

For the talented producer behind the successful *Monster Hunter* franchise, Ryozo Tsujimoto, Capcom is like a family business. Its current CEO, Kenzo Tsujimoto, is his father, and his brother, Haruhiro Tsujimoto, is its president. But Ryozo has more than carved out a name for himself, as *Monster Hunter* has become a Japanese gaming institution.

Ryozo Tsujimoto History

Monster Hunter Tri G **2011 [3DS]**
Monster Hunter Tri **2009 [Wii]**
Monster Hunter Freedom **2005 [PSP]**
Monster Hunter **2004 [PS2]**

High Point

In many ways, *Monster Hunter Tri* brought the series full circle, bringing many of the nuances of the portable *Monster Hunter* games back to a core console in a more polished form.

Monster Hunter 4

CONCEPT ■ Capcom looks to gladden the hearts of hunters everywhere as it creates bigger hunting grounds and adds a seriously kinetic edge to *Monster Hunter 4*.



Bigger, badder and better is still an important idea in games. Despite a shift towards the casual in other areas of mobile gaming, there is still a huge core of gamers who want deeper and more immersive experiences on handheld systems – and developers like Capcom want to provide them. That's why the next iteration of the *Monster Hunter* franchise on the 3DS, *Monster Hunter 4*, is looking like the most ambitious yet. It's clear there's been a spirit of cross-pollination at Capcom, with many of the nuances of both *Monster Hunter Tri G* and recent console hit *Dragon's Dogma* having made their way into the handheld *Monster Hunter 4*.

Your stomping grounds in *Monster Hunter 4* have been massively expanded. Now, rather than areas being broken up by loading screens, it uses a more seamless, open-world approach. Part of the reason for that is this is a far faster-paced and almost kinetic version of *Monster Hunter*. An exciting element of verticality has been added to combat: you'll be able to fight on the go, jumping from platform to platform in places like caves as you battle, and you'll scale sheer cliff faces in the expanded outdoor environment as the enraged monsters you're tasked with farming chase you. What makes battles even more spectacular is that the environment is now destructible, and as these massive creatures attack they'll smash through rock, vegetation and whatever else is in the way to get to you. You'll need to be quicker on your feet than ever, and thankfully both the target camera system from *Tri G* and a 3D-based free one will help make that possible in this open world.

But quick reflexes and a better camera aren't the only new things you'll be bringing to battle. *Monster Hunter 4* is taking a leaf from *Dragon's Dogma* with the introduction of an ability to actually climb onto monsters to attack them, delivering a dramatic coup de grace as they try to shake you off. While this focus on epic ground battles and vertical scope means that some elements introduced in *Tri* like water combat won't be making a return, they're being replaced by a greater sense of danger. You can expect more surprise attacks by unknown monsters as you travel the land, searching for your quarry, and will need to react on the fly.

There's a spirit of adventure at the heart of this *Monster Hunter*, and that will be reflected in its RPG elements. Rather than being rooted in one place, your base of operations will be a moving caravan. You'll use it to travel between a large number of villages, all of which will have their own distinct cultural flavour, and Capcom is promising the biggest number of NPCs to interact with in series history. It's all very promising, and with *Monster Hunter 4*, Capcom is not only once again bringing the kind of hardcore experiences that gamers want to the 3DS, but also expanding the formula in some exciting ways. We can't wait for the hunt to begin.



"This is a far faster-paced and almost kinetic version of Monster Hunter. An exciting element of verticality has been added to combat"

■ Below: It'll be interesting to see just how *The Walking Dead* handles your interactions with other survivors. Will they all be scripted or are there random elements?





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Terminal Reality
Release: Q1 2013
Genre: First-person shooter
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

The Texas-based Terminal Reality was founded in 1994 by ex-Microsoft employee Mark Randel and former Mallard Software manager Brett Combs. The developer has recently concentrated on ports or licensed games like *Kinect Star Wars*, but it has made some innovative, original games, including *4x4 Evolution* and *Def Jam Rapstar*.

Developer History

Kinect Star Wars
2012 [360]

Ghostbusters: The Video Game
2009 [Multi]

4x4 Evolution
2000 [Multi]

Terminal Velocity
1995 [PC]

High Point

The fun but flawed *Ghostbusters* game came out of nowhere, providing the sequel that fans have long desired by staying true to the source material, thanks to the involvement of the cast.

The Walking Dead

CONCEPT ■ The *Walking Dead* franchise gets a new videogame addition in the form of an FPS centred on the exploits of Southern brothers Daryl and Merle.

Walking with the brothers

Zombies and gamers are old and very familiar bedfellows. We've been fighting the undead for so long that they're almost a gaming cliché. But with the explosion of *The Walking Dead* as a cultural phenomenon following the AMC television adaptation of Robert Kirkman's cult comic book, the rest of the world has finally caught up. It was inevitable that we'd get a horde of *The Walking Dead* games, and while this isn't the first – Telltale Games has already broken the dam with its excellent episodic adventure game – Terminal Reality's adaptation is promising a dark cross between an FPS and a survival horror game. Unlike Telltale's offering, which is based on the comic books, this game is set in the television version of that universe, giving its developers greater creative freedom and a wealth of new characters from the TV show. Case in point: its two lead characters, Daryl and Merle Dixon. Neither exists in the continuity of the comic, allowing Terminal Reality to set its game before the events of the TV show and illustrate how they survived the outbreak in rural Georgia before they joined up with Rick and his little band of survivors.

Making an FPS might seem an obvious approach to the *Walking Dead* universe, but Terminal Reality is promising that it'll be staying true to the spirit of the show – this isn't a gung-ho zombie shooter in which you can just blast away. Travelling through the countryside as Daryl will see you constantly on the edge as 'walkers' relentlessly hunt you. While they can be fought in small numbers, if you make too much noise you risk bringing the horde down on you. It means you'll be forced to choose when to use stealth and when to just let rip with your weapons. The entire game looks to be balanced on the choice of fight or flight, and from the sound of things flight, an unusual choice for most gamers, could be the most sensible way to progress.

> "The situations in our game are every bit as gruesome and shocking as they are in the TV series"
> DREW HAWORTH TERMINAL REALITY

When you choose to fight, in a survival horror twist, you'll need to be mindful of your scarce ammo and your medical supplies – nothing will be worse than the click of an empty chamber in a firefight.

If the TV series has taught us anything, it's that the living are as dangerous as the dead in this nightmare world. As Daryl encounters various survivors, light role-playing elements will determine whether they join you to battle the walkers or hinder you in an effort to ensure their own survival.

It's early days, but *The Walking Dead* is looking like a curious and ambitious mix of a game. We'll need to see more to know how it's coming along, but hopefully Terminal Reality, which did a solid job with *Ghostbusters*, will be able to breathe new life into a gaming trope in *The Walking Dead*.



■ Above: Daryl is an expert with a crossbow in the TV show, and we expect it'll be your primary weapon in *The Walking Dead*. With its silent killing ability and bolts you can collect after kills, it makes the perfect walker-killing tool.



■ Below: The game will, of course, feature the usual gaggle of car licences and real-world drivers to legitimise proceedings.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, PS Vita, Xbox 360
Origin: Italy
Publisher: PQube
Developer: Milestone
Release: 12 October
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

After netting a few mildly recognisable licences over the last few years, Milestone has been pumping out racing sims at a prodigious rate. Early Nineties efforts included *Super Loopz* and *Screamer*, but the studio didn't really hit its stride until *Superbike*. Now the proud custodian of the SBK and WRC brands, the Milan-based studio has never been more prolific.

Developer History

MUD: FIM Motocross World Championship **2012 [Multi]**
WRC: FIA World Rally Championship **2010 [Multi]**
SBK X: Superbikle World Championship **2010 [Multi]**
Superbike World Championship **1999 [PC]**

High Point

The studio's first punt at the WRC licence announced itself as a worthy successor to Evolution Studios' PS2 efforts.

WRC 3: FIA World Rally Championship

CONCEPT ■ This annual rally sim has a bit more fun this year, introducing a slew of modes that break away from its stilted formula.

It's rally good

While we can all marvel at the pixel-perfect facsimiles of Ferrari's latest cut and relish the opportunity to skirt around Silverstone's hallowed tarmac, racing simulators never leave much room for anything other than po-faced imitation.

Last year's *WRC 2* was no different in that respect. A rally sim that honoured its licence with hairpin turns across cliffside tracks, snowy peaks that were nothing short of a bitch to navigate, and a bloke in the passenger seat who incessantly stated the obvious. So you can imagine our surprise when we hopped back in the driving seat for this year's *WRC 3* to find that developer Milestone has injected a little silliness into the series.

Maybe the developer has spent a bit too much time in the mud. Well, *MUD*, actually – the dirtbike-sim-cum-energy-drink-commercial from Milestone that was released earlier in the year. It was a racer with a disregard for the laws of physics, sending bikes skyrocketing through the air, performing daring somersaults and skidding around the dirt with little concern for pointed realism.

■ The rocky roads of Greece and stormy skies of Wales dazzle thanks to the new Spike Engine.

That's not to say that *WRC 3* dispenses with any handle on reality whatsoever. It's still strictly focused on point-to-point rallying – no head-to-head – and the game's championship, online and other rally modes remain distinctly aimed at those looking to replicate the bumpy thrills of the sport. It's here that precision is truly honed within the numerous courses, nailing those times and skimming crucial seconds off your lap time.

But the newly added career mode brings an invigorating twist to the formula, introducing several interesting distractions away from the bog-standard template. It all falls under the banner of Road To Glory – a mode designed to fuse racing with in-depth team management. But the clear highlight is the selection of challenges that range from smashing a number of targets around the course in a set time frame (Crash & Run) to trying to survive long enough to reach the finish as your car literally falls apart (Survival Contest).

It's a welcome addition that does much to colour an otherwise iterative release. And while the visual side of things has been greatly improved since last year thanks to a shiny new engine two years in the making, it still has some way to go before it catches up to its competitors. *WRC* still lacks the adrenaline-pumping thrills of *Need For Speed*, the depth and intricate detail of *Gran Turismo* and the spontaneity of *Dirt*, but it's encouraging to see the developer expand the series' scope beyond its niche audience.

"We've streamlined every aspect of the game to give new players an instant gameplay satisfaction"
SÉBASTIEN PELLICANO MILESTONE



"Picture every film you've ever loved as a kid all cut together into some crazy montage, and that's basically the script for our game"
SEAN MURRAY HELLO GAMES



While the skills that made you such a hero in the original *Joe Danger* will be needed, more quirky goals such as capturing bad guys will also come into play. It's Hello Games' way of pushing the concept of filming a movie as much as it can.

Joe Danger: The Movie

CONCEPT Hello Games returns with the second instalment of *Joe Danger*, aiming to expand everything about the original that made it such a success.

How Hello Games is ready to dominate the downloadable market

Joe Danger: The Movie is all about expansion, or seemingly so. Whereas the first instalment was a focused experience that succeeded thanks to its fine level design and ever-tempting leaderboards, its sequel wants to be far more daring. Thankfully, the original concept remains. This is still a game with its roots based in speed, trickery and combos – which instantly allows it to remain one of the more obsessive ways to spend a day – but there's far more on offer now for anyone who felt *Joe Danger* needed an added kick.

This manifests itself at first in the more obvious avenues for expansion. Rather than just concentrate on the eponymous hero, this time he's brought along 49 friends that can all jump into a choice of 20 vehicles. There are also 100 levels this time out, giving *The Movie* a layer of depth that dwarfs its elder brother. Hello Games has gone further than this, however, expanding the game through a level editor and multiplayer. While the former is self-explanatory and surely a way to prolong the game's longevity, the developer is hoping that its community invests itself in the title more than just building for the sake of it. *Joe Danger* has always been about imagining the world you're flying through is the set of a movie, and this wants you to generate scenes rather than mere levels. This has been spiced up with more embellishments such as robots, jetpacks and, of course, monkeys. Multiplayer is just as diverse, competitive races featuring bears fighting it out with humans on unicycles and all manner of creative flights of fancy put in place by the UK studio. If this isn't one of the more in-depth downloadable titles of 2012, it'll be fascinating to see what else steps up to trump it.

Hello Games refuses to leave anything to chance either, keeping the game's core ideals, as mentioned, and feathering them with extras. You may be asked to chase down a specific number of crooks to perfect a level, or fight dinosaurs in the name of crafting the most exhilarating race possible. The developer seems more than capable of doing it too, its long-term goals apparently very much on course to create the bigger and better sequel. When this comes to Xbox Live Arcade and PC later this year – and we'd imagine a PSN release sometime after, even if it does take a little while – it should reach a much wider audience and have more impact than its predecessor based on word of mouth alone. It'll be interesting to see just how triumphant the returning *Joe Danger* can be.

Environments have been given a spruce up, both in order to tie in to the game's main concept and give more options when creating user levels.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: UK
Publisher: Hello Games
Developer: In-house
Release: Autumn
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

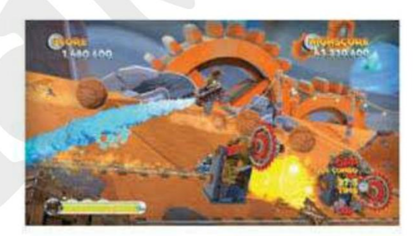
Brought together by former employees of Criterion, EA and Kujo, Hello Games came to prominence with *Joe Danger* in 2010. Gaining credit not only within the specialist press but outside it – the developer was recently included in a list of the most innovative and creative companies of the past 12 months by *The Guardian* – the future is very bright for the small studio.

Developer History

Spider-Man: Friend Or Foe **2007 [Multi]**
Monster House **2006 [Multi]**
Get On Da Mic **2004 [PS2]**

High Point

Joe Danger wins almost by default, but the ridiculously addictive platformer was as challenging as it was entertaining, opening up many doors for Hello Games to walk through. For now it may continue to focus on its one and only series, but we expect much bigger projects down the line.



New vehicles are no big surprise for a sequel like this, but the knowledge that jetpacks and unicycles are a part of the package is surely going to raise an eyebrow or two.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

LEGO LORD OF THE RINGS

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **WB Games**
Developer: **Traveller's Tales**
ETA: **2 November**



THE CINEMATIC *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy gets the Lego treatment to coincide with the release of *The Hobbit* this Christmas. Worryingly, the game will utilise the voice acting and score from the movies, making it difficult to surmise how Traveller's Tales intends to ape the po-faced source material. There's sure to be plenty to love from this Middle-earth, though, even if it lacks the charm of the other efforts.

THUNDERCATS

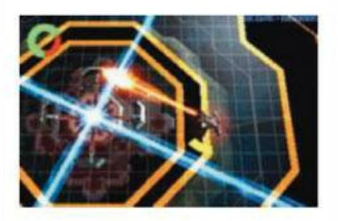
Format: **DS**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **Aspect Digital**
ETA: **28 September**



THUNDERCATS, HO! Those cat-like humanoid extraterrestrials leap onto DS screens in September as a tie-in to the current animated reboot. It's a straightforward platformer, where players take control of the top cat Lion-O as he battles Mumm-Ra and his evil cronies. From the developer of *Deep Duck Trouble Starring Donald Duck* on the Master System, expect a platformer with a suitably retro vibe.

KOKUGA

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **G.rev**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **27 September (Japan)**



G.REV IS putting the finishing touches on its tank-shooter-cum-trading-card game, *Kokuga*, heading to the 3DS in Japan later in the year. The developer confirmed that it will also support download play, alongside the news that musician Manabu Namiki (*DoDonPachi*, *Deathsmiles*, *Mushihime-sama*, *Ketsui*) will be providing the score. It's another boon for a game already boasting eye-catching, kaleidoscopic visuals.

ONE PIECE: ROMANCE DAWN

Format: **PSP**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **31 December (Japan)**



WHILE WE folk patiently await the localisation of PS3 exclusive *One Piece: Pirate Warriors*, Namco Bandai has announced a new PSP entry in the series. *One Piece: Romance Dawn* is being touted as a traditional RPG with a command battle system. Around 30 *One Piece* games have been developed, but only a handful have made it outside Japan, so add this pirating adventure to your import list.

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS DECLASSIFIED

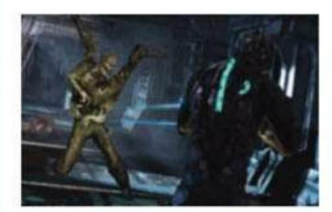
Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **TBA**
ETA: **November 2012**



LONG-RUMOURED since Sony's PS Vita was announced, Activision has let the cat out of the bag and announced *Call Of Duty: Black Ops Declassified.* Rumoured to be set between the last two entries in Treyarch's *Black Ops* saga, the game will feature multiplayer, Spec Ops missions and a bespoke campaign. Hopefully it'll be the first FPS to utilise the full potential of the dual-analogue handheld.

DEAD SPACE 3

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **Visceral Games**
ETA: **March 2013**



VISCERAL HAS begun talking details for its chilly horror sequel. The studio has confirmed that Isaac's co-op partner, John Carver, is a sergeant who will spend a good portion of the game fretting about his family. There's also a new breed of Necromorph: Feeders. These tiny mutants are the result of cannibalistic humans feasting on the infected flesh of Necromorphs. It's all looking rather splendidly grim.

METAL SLUG F2P

Format: **Mobile**
Publisher: **SNK Playmore**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **December 2012**



SNK PLAYMORE is hoping to narrow in on the gap in the MMORTS marketplace on mobile platforms with *Metal Slug F2P*. Expected to land on iOS and Android around December, it will feature two different game modes, Simulation – the standard RTS mode – and Arcade, which features a series of war-based mini-games that utilise your device's touch screen.

NEW LITTLE KING STORY

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Konami**
Developer: **Marvellous Entertainment**
ETA: **November 2012**

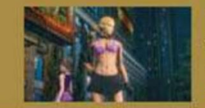


IF *NEW LITTLE KING'S STORY* and *Pikmin 3* had to fight to decide which was cuter, we're not sure who would emerge victorious. Not that they'd fight each other – they'd probably just hug until the world was a better place. Utopian dreams aside, Marvellous Entertainment has confirmed that *New Little King's Story* will have plenty of neat additions like a day/night cycle and post-launch DLC. It all sounds so lovely.



DELAYED – Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 (Multi)

Namco Bandai has pushed back its multiformat sharpshooter until early 2013, which is probably the best time to release a game if the title doesn't feature the words 'Call', 'Of' or 'Duty' in the title.



CANCELLED – Enter The Dominatrix (Multi)

THQ has announced that the standalone expansion to *Saints Row: The Third, Enter The Dominatrix*, has been cancelled. It's not all bad news, though; it will instead be integrated into the sequel.

JOJO'S BIZARRE ADVENTURE ALL STAR BATTLE

Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **CyberConnect2**
ETA: **2013**



NOW NAMCO Bandai has shushed away that nonsense about a *Smash Bros* teaser website, the publisher has revealed that the battle it was promising us was, in fact, a new *JoJo* game, with *Asura's Wrath* developer CyberConnect2 and its barmy sensibilities and punchy visual style at the helm. *JoJo* has never been a massive hit outside Japan, but that's all about to change.

MARVEL AVENGERS: BATTLE FOR EARTH

Format: **Xbox 360, Wii U**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Ubisoft Quebec**
ETA: **December 2012**



IF YOU'VE been hankering for an *Avengers* game since the film demolished box office records earlier this year, then, well, this probably isn't what you had in mind. A Kinect and Wii U motion-control adventure game that assembles Marvel's greatest (and Hawkeye) into a prosaic, kiddie-friendly flail-fest. We know it's a shameless cash grab, but you can do better than this, Ubisoft!

F1 RACE STARS

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Codemasters**
Developer: **Codemasters Racing Studios**
ETA: **November 2012**



IT WOULD be easy enough to label Codemasters' cartoonish *F1 Race Stars* as a mere *Mario Kart* me-too, but it has a charm that announces it as more than just a cheap imitation. The vibrant visuals are a highlight, buoyed by famous faces and hair-raising track design, but it's whether the game can match its aesthetics with distinct gameplay ideas that will decide whether it's a real contender.

ADVENTURE TIME: HEY ICE KING! WHY'D YOU STEAL OUR GARBAGE?!

Format: **3DS, DS**
Publisher: **D3Publisher**
Developer: **WayForward Technologies**
ETA: **23 October (US)**



ADVENTURE TIME is one of a crop of Adult Swim-style animated shows that you've probably never seen but are guaranteed to adore. Name-checking the divisive *Zelda II* as a major influence – as well as *Castlevania*, for good measure – WayForward's side-scrolling platformer packs in plenty of retro goodness. We don't know whether it'll be any good, but you can be damned sure it'll be funny.

GRANDPA DANGER

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **December (Japan)**



AN ADAPTATION of popular *Jump* manga *Dangerous Jii-san Ja* (*Grandpa Danger* to us English speakers). The 3DS will be getting this frankly bizarre side-scrolling brawler later in the year. Namco Bandai has just launched the teaser site, which features the sprightly geriatric punching people and firing lasers out of his arse. Sounds right up our street, frankly.

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **WB Games**
Developer: **NetherRealm Studios**
ETA: **2013**



NETHERREALM'S DC fighter continues to defy logic and reason by having Superman getting his face caved in by, of all people, Nightwing. The latest update from the studio adds the baton-wielding emo to the swelling roster of fighters, including fellow newcomer Cyborg. The art direction, which features armour for Superman, stands a chance of crapping all over DC's respectable lineage.

PLAYSTATION ALL-STARS BATTLE ROYALE

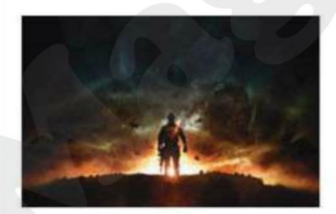
Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **SuperBot Entertainment**
ETA: **24 October**



SONY'S MASCOT-DRIVEN brawler continues to amass an impressive selection of top-tier characters. The latest additions include Cole MacGrath from *inFamous* and the eponymous stars of *Jak And Daxter*. It was recently revealed that Naughty Dog was originally set to develop the game, until *The Last Of Us* came along. We're pretty sure we can all agree that SuperBot got something of a bum deal.

BATTLEFIELD 4

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **TBC**
ETA: **2013**



BATTLEFIELD 4 has been announced via a pre-order bonus for *Medal Of Honor: Warfighter*. Players who order the military shooter early can expect beta access to another, virtually identical, military shooter. We're not sure EA intended to announce the game this early, as you can expect it to steal the limelight away from the publisher's upcoming *MOH* sequel, arriving at the tail end of the year.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

TORCHLIGHT II

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Perfect World**
Developer: **Runic Games**
ETA: **September 2012**



GOOD THINGS, they say, are worth waiting for, and we hope that's true of *Torchlight II*. Runic's epic dungeon-crawler has been delayed until the end of September. According to Runic president Travis Baldree, the reason for the delay is extensive balancing of its campaign story acts. No one likes waiting, but given the constant rebalancing that Blizzard is forced to do on *Diablo III*, perhaps it's for the best.

TOTAL WAR: ROME II

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **The Creative Assembly**
ETA: **2013**



THERE ARE always games considered genre-defining, and *Rome: Total War* was one of them. As a result, Sega's announcement of *Total War: Rome II* has sent a wave of excitement through the RTS community, as The Creative Assembly promises to push the *Total War* vision as far as possible in this sequel. It's a tall order, but if anyone can do it, The Creative Assembly can.

EX TROOPERS

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **September 2012 (Japan)**



ANY FEELING that Capcom isn't serious about pushing the *Lost Planet* 3DS spin-off, *EX Troopers*, were dispelled by a recent and impressive gameplay showing. It's a quirky, cel-shaded, anime take on that universe as the students of a school academy on EDN III take on a bunch of ruthless snow pirates, produced by *Monster Hunter* veteran Shintaro Kojima, and it has oodles of charm.

SONIC & ALL-STARS RACING TRANSFORMED

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **November 2012**



KART RACERS benefit from iteration as developers continually up the ante on their zany ideas and find new ways to help us enjoy playing with familiar, iconic characters on increasingly complex and innovative tracks. Well, that's the idea, and *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* might just do that if Sega genuinely takes advantage of the design possibilities of cars that can transform into planes and boats.

GIRL OF THE OLD SCHOOL BUILDING

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **TBA**
Developer: **Arc System Works**
ETA: **2013**



IT'S ALWAYS fun when a game by a respected developer is still a bit of a mystery. Case in point: developer Arc System Works' upcoming adventure game, *Girl Of The Old School Building*. Little is currently known besides that it'll sport Arc's trademark art style – as showcased in 2D fighting games like *BlazBlue* – and will only be available on 3DS via download. It's intriguing and we'll bring you more details soon.

THE WAR Z

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Arktos Entertainment**
Developer: **Hammerpoint Interactive**
ETA: **November 2012**



ZOMBIES ARE the flavour of the month right now, and the previously unheard of Hammerpoint Interactive believes it has the chops to deliver a zombie MMO that captures the current fad, and has enough of its own flavour to be worthwhile. Clearly inspired by the likes of *DayZ*, this quest-based MMO will see players attempt to survive in a zombie-infested world with scarce resources.

ARMY OF TWO: THE DEVIL'S CARTEL

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **Visceral Games**
ETA: **March 2013**



EA IS hoping that *Dead Space* developer Visceral Games is the studio to inject some vigour into the *Army Of Two* franchise, handing it the second sequel in the series. The two stars are Alpha and Bravo, members of paramilitary outfit Tactical Worldwide Operations who find themselves embroiled in a Mexican drug war. Let's hope the third time's a charm for the *Army Of Two* games.

YAKUZA & YAKUZA 2 HD

Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **November 2012 (Japan)**



YAKUZA AND *Yakuza 2* are set to be re-released in HD on PlayStation 3 in Japan just prior to the release of *Yakuza 5* in December. The graphically enhanced versions of the games are looking great, and these updates will allow players to install data onto their PS3 in order to cut down on scene change and map loading times. No word on a Western release yet, but we're hopeful.



DELAYED – Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs (PC)

Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs, thechineseroom's very atmospheric first-person survival horror game, has sadly been delayed until 2013 in order, its developer says, to ensure a high level of quality.



DELAYED – Ginga Force (360)

Qute, the developer behind the quirky 360-exclusive vertical shmup *Ginga Force*, has pushed the game's release back from August to an unspecified 2012 date, with no reason given as yet.

DANCE CENTRAL 3

Format: **Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Microsoft**
Developer: **Harmonix Music Systems**
ETA: **October 2012**



IT LOOKS like Kinect's *Dance Central 3* will be a dance-off through musical history. Its story mode has players going back in time to take on dance crews and their killer moves from past decades, going as far back as the Seventies. To that end, it'll feature a diverse track list, taking in everything from the Village People's *YMCA* to Backstreet Boys' *Everybody* and Lil Jon's *Get Low*.

WASTELAND 2

Format: **PC/Mac**
Publisher: **inXile**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



IT'S STILL a while away, but *Wasteland 2*, backed by a Kickstarter campaign that raised almost $3 million, is finally taking shape. The inXile team showed off the first screenshot of the new game running in the cross-platform Unity engine, and it's looking impressive. inXile seems to be genuinely managing to capture the *Wasteland* spirit, but giving *Wasteland 2* a modern spin.

STREET FIGHTER X TEKKEN VITA

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **19 October**



FIGHT FANS finally have a date for the PS Vita release of the flawed but rather enjoyable *Street Fighter X Tekken* on Sony's handheld, now coming in October. The Vita version will have all the PS3 edition's character DLC content and some additional Vita-only goodies right out of the box. Best of all, it'll feature multiplayer between the Vita and PS3 versions of the game over both Wi-Fi and 3G.

EXZEUS 2

Format: **Android**
Publisher: **HyperDevbox**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **October 2012**



EXZEUS 2 expands on the *Space Harrier*-style gameplay of the original to incorporate ground-based sections, making the game closer to something like *Kid Icarus Uprising*, only with mechs. The Android version gets around the clumsy controls of the iOS original by supporting physical controllers, while a Tegra 3-enhanced edition will feature improved visuals and exclusive weapons.

THE SIMS 3: SUPERNATURAL

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **The Sims Studio**
ETA: **7 September**



EXPANSIONS TO *The Sims 3* aren't uncommon, but *Supernatural* is just a little different. As well as allowing players to create Sims that are witches, werewolves, zombies, vampires and other mythical creatures with all the resulting magical abilities, it will place them in an all-new world called Moonlight Falls. It all promises to be a fun evolution of the *Sims* concept into the fantasy realm.

NAUGHTY BEAR: PANIC IN PARADISE

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **505 Games**
Developer: **Behaviour Interactive**
ETA: **November 2012**



THREE WORDS we thought we'd never write: *Naughty Bear* sequel. But Behaviour Interactive is taking a stab at the interesting but poorly executed concept of a teddy bear seeking revenge in a variety of humorous yet murderous ways in *Naughty Bear: Panic In Paradise*. With luck, the downloadable title will have gameplay that actually does justice to its warped but endearing premise.

DOUBLE DRAGON NEON

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Majesco**
Developer: **Wayforward**
ETA: **September 2012**



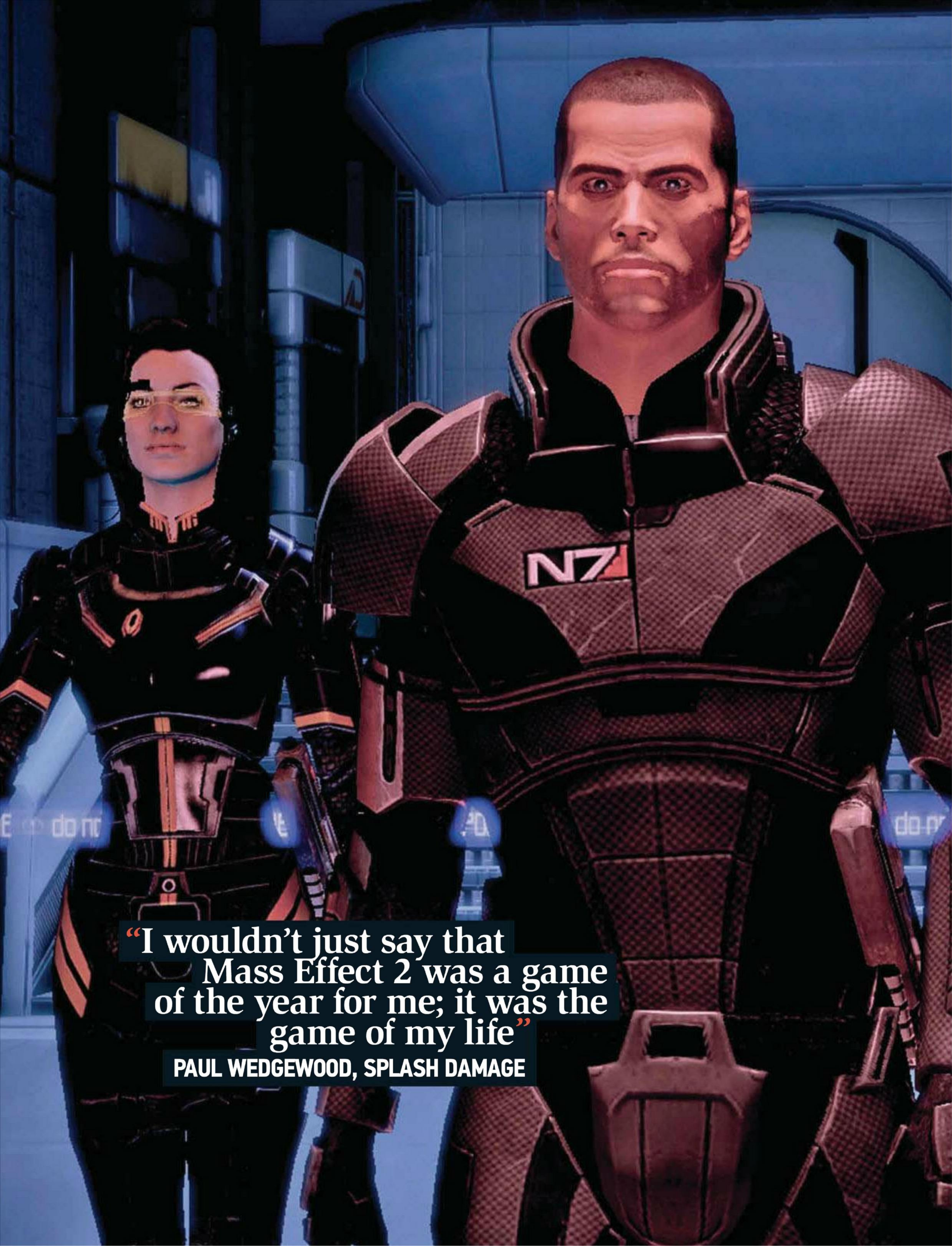
THE CLASSIC Majesco brawler, *Double Dragon*, returns in rather garish form with the brightly coloured *Double Dragon Neon*, coming to XBLA and PSN. The updated game is a 'radical' 3D re-imagining of the old-school beat-'em-up with a seriously retro vibe and an impressive musical score that pays homage to the original, but it's harder to tell yet if the years have been kind to its fighting action.

WWE '13

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **THQ**
Developer: **Yuke's**
ETA: **2 November**

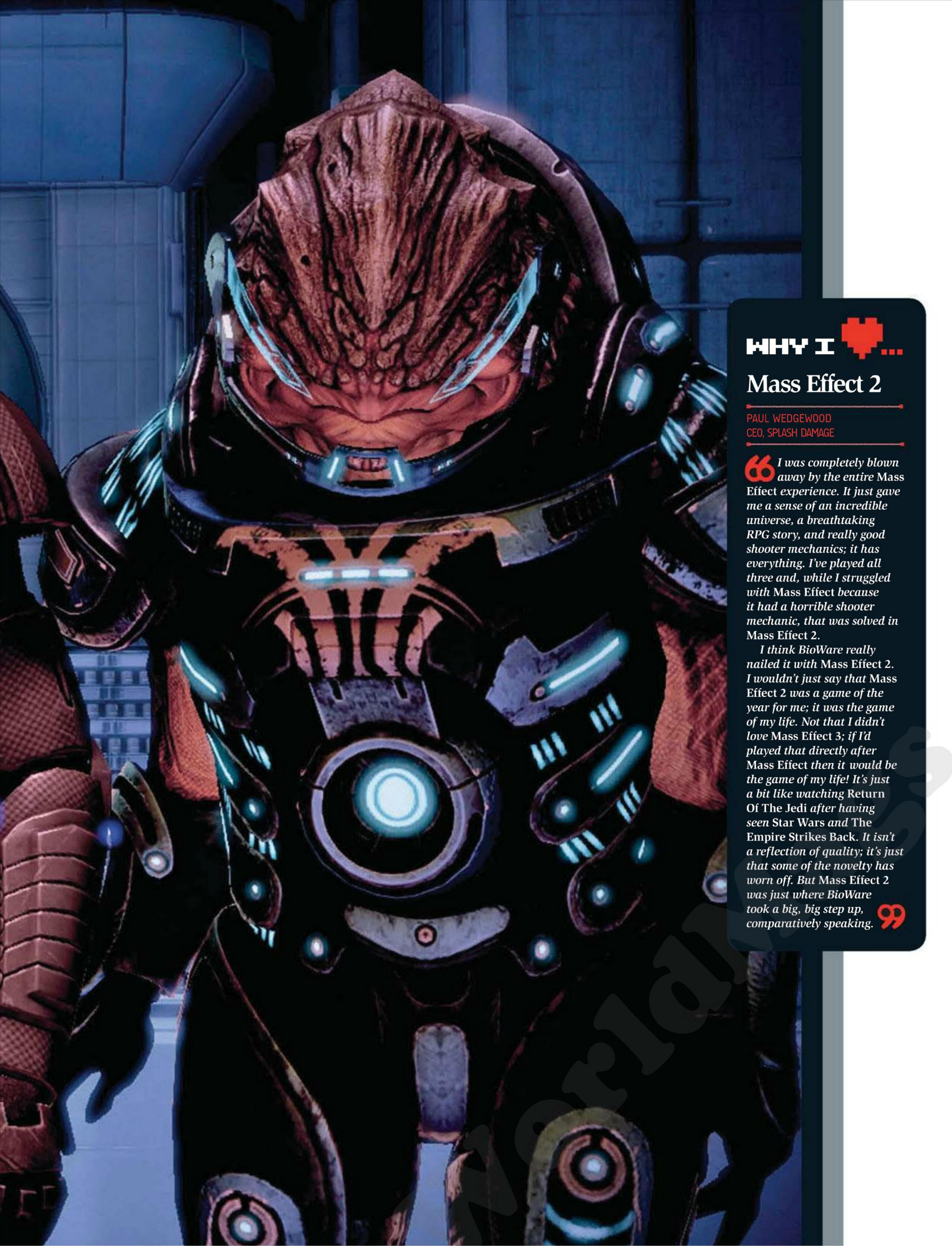


THQ'S WRESTLING games, with the notable exception of 2011's excellent *WWE All Stars*, have been stuck in a rut for years. Last year's *WWE '12* did nothing to change that, so it's hard to get excited about *WWE '13*, which is largely building on it. Still, THQ is promising to pull out all the stops in a game fronted by current wrestling darling CM Punk. Hopefully some of his charisma will rub off.



"I wouldn't just say that Mass Effect 2 was a game of the year for me; it was the game of my life"

PAUL WEDGEWOOD, SPLASH DAMAGE



WHY I ♥...

Mass Effect 2

PAUL WEDGEWOOD
CEO, SPLASH DAMAGE

“*I was completely blown away by the entire* Mass Effect *experience. It just gave me a sense of an incredible universe, a breathtaking RPG story, and really good shooter mechanics; it has everything. I’ve played all three and, while I struggled with* Mass Effect *because it had a horrible shooter mechanic, that was solved in* Mass Effect 2.

I think BioWare really nailed it with Mass Effect 2. *I wouldn’t just say that* Mass Effect 2 *was a game of the year for me; it was the game of my life. Not that I didn’t love* Mass Effect 3*; if I’d played that directly after* Mass Effect *then it would be the game of my life! It’s just a bit like watching* Return Of The Jedi *after having seen* Star Wars *and* The Empire Strikes Back. *It isn’t a reflection of quality; it’s just that some of the novelty has worn off. But* Mass Effect 2 *was just where BioWare took a big, big step up, comparatively speaking.*”


Matt and Barton are playing
Canabalt
OUYA
OUYA
OUYA

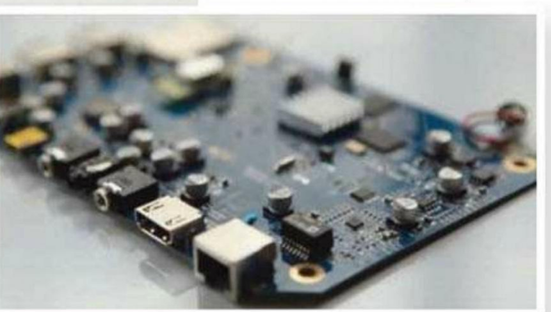
OUYA

THE $99 CONSOLE OF THE PEOPLE

The next generation just got more interesting and unpredictable with the announcement of Ouya, an Android-based console that costs just $99, features a library of free-to-play games and hands over a development kit to everyone who buys the hardware. But do a few unanswered questions suggest Ouya is too good to be true?

Anyone who thinks the next-generation console war will be fought only by Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo, think again. The videogames landscape is changing almost beyond recognition, with the likes of Steam, iOS and Facebook all muscling in and redefining how games are played, where they are played, who they're played by and how much they cost. As a result, the future of the videogames industry is looking more unpredictable than ever before, and anything could and probably will happen. Perhaps the time is right for something totally different to step in and take over.

If initial response is anything to go by, that new contender to the console crown could very well be Ouya. It's not a name that's as well known as PlayStation or Xbox, but it sure has captured the public's imagination. After one of the most successful campaigns to ever grace crowdfunding website Kickstarter, Ouya pulled in 63,416 backers, who pledged a combined total of $8,596,475 to ensure that this unusual new console can be released in March 2013.



So what is Ouya and how did it capture the interest, and the credit card details, of so many people? Running on Android-based hardware, Ouya is an open-source games console with a 100 per cent digital distribution platform, where all games feature some sort of free-to-play component and every single unit is also a development kit without an expensive SDK or licensing fees. Oh, and it only costs $99.

"I think there are a number of things that are unique about what we're doing," says Julie Uhrman, CEO of Ouya. "First and foremost, we are really challenging the status quo. The games industry is increasingly entrenched in the business of running the business. Games on the television have historically been closed while every other platform is open. Games on a TV cost ten times more than they do on other platforms. And we are challenging this; we are saying that we want an open platform where every game has an element that is free, and it's affordable and accessible to gamers. That's why we priced it at $99."

It's a rousing argument, at the very least. The idea of paying just $99 – about £64 in the Queen's money – and getting a console and an entire library of games is an extremely enticing one. Even as a platform for indie development and publishing, it seems like a bargain, so it's easy to see why so many people have stumped up the cash on promises alone. And it's not just ordinary gamers. A wealth of big-name developers and publishers have pledged support for Ouya, whether it be through verbal acknowledgement of the console's strengths, by donating money toward the Kickstarter project, or even confirming games for the platform. When Square Enix announces a launch title for a system, for example, you know this is serious business.

Brian Fargo of inXile Entertainment, who also enjoyed huge Kickstarter success with his *Wasteland 2* proposal, is one of the biggest supporters of Ouya and attributes the console's excited reception to its open nature. "The television is the last screen that smaller developers have essentially been locked out of," he says. "There has been wonderful innovation on PC and iOS, but while the console games are truly amazing in scope and fidelity, there has not been creativity like we have seen in the other formats. This is all part of a bigger movement of democratising



The Ouya team prototyped a number of controllers with designer Yves Behar, who also worked on the One Laptop Per Child project, among many others.

Though the Kickstarter phase has come to an end, Ouya can still be pre-ordered for $99 from the official website at **www.ouya.tv**



creativity and allowing us to connect with our gamers. It is officially exciting to be in the games business again."

The explosion of indie gaming in the past five years has, as Fargo suggests, brought new life into open platforms like PC and mobile. But consoles have yet to enjoy the same level of creativity. WiiWare got off to a good start but ultimately fizzled out as developers struggled to get a licence from Nintendo, while Microsoft's Xbox Indie Games programme failed to give games the limelight they deserved by burying them right at the bottom of its Xbox Live Marketplace. Ouya, if handled correctly, could level the playing field and bring truly creative indie games to the TV screen. And though Ouya has Android hardware and Nvidia's ubiquitous Tegra 3 processor at its core, Uhrman assures us that the console will be about more than just ports of existing mobile games. "We believe that new, exciting, creative games will be brought to Ouya that not only want to leverage the television screen with the HD graphics and surround sound but also with our controller, which is unique in that it has traditional controls as well as the touch pad," she confidently asserts.



The console itself is said to be no bigger than a Rubik's Cube. Try not to lose it down the back of your PS3.



This classy-looking limited edition Ouya was offered as an incentive to final week Kickstarter backers. Too bad it won't be available to the public.



Indeed, of the first few games to be confirmed for Ouya, the majority are console-style games. *Final Fantasy III* may be a port of the remake that first appeared on the DS before going to iOS, Android and PSP, but its original incarnation was on the Famicom. The Ouya port, remarkably, is the first time the English-language version of the classic RPG has appeared on a TV screen, where it belongs. Likewise, Ouya's first exclusive game, an episodic prequel to *Human Element*, the forthcoming survival horror game from ex-*Call Of Duty* dev Robert Bowling, is another example of a console-style release. *Offensive Combat*, a multiplayer shooter from the ex-Activision team at U4iA Games, is the sort of experience that works best with a controller, a big HD screen and a stable internet connection. That connection and controller have also allowed OnLive to step in and pledge day one support for Ouya. With OnLive streaming big-name PC games through its subscription service, the console also gets genuine, high-quality, next-gen titles to sit right next to its catalogue of indie games.

But for anyone who is paying attention, this initially exciting line-up of launch titles poses one big problem: a lack of true exclusives. *Final Fantasy III* is a port of a six-year-old remake of a 22-year-old game. *Offensive Combat* is also in development for desktop web browsers. OnLive is available on plenty of other systems and only offers games that already exist on multiple formats. And even Robert Bowling's game, while exclusive, is a low-risk series that ties in to a bigger game that isn't currently announced for Ouya.

Does Ouya have what it takes to attract a high number of exclusive games and does it actually need exclusives? Opinions are mixed, to say the least. "What is Ouya, to be honest?" asks Markus Kassulke, CEO of HandyGames, one of the first developers to pledge support. "It's an Android controlled with a game pad. It's nothing special like the Wii, which came out with a special mechanic. I think they don't need exclusives at this moment. They have support because people want to play games they know on the TV or games that are in the app store at the timeframe of launch."

Robert Bowling believes otherwise. "We're at a state in our industry where we're hungry for new IPs, yet we continue to focus on extending our existing properties to the point of exhaustion," he argues. "We do this because it's simply too risky and expensive to devote millions of dollars to a property that could fail to connect with players. Ouya is taking a lot of that risk off the table by allowing us to build innovative experiences without betting the farm on it and release it easily and cost-effectively for an indie budget to a super-dedicated audience of early adopters. An opportunity to me, that is pricelessly beneficial."

"Ouya will have exclusives by virtue of it being an open platform at a great price point," says Mark Kern, former *World Of Warcraft* designer and a top-tier backer of Ouya on Kickstarter. "Many titles will start on Ouya by independent devs and then trickle onto other platforms. Ouya has turned the model on its head."



"Games on a TV cost ten times more than they do on other platforms. And we are challenging this"

Julie Uhrman

HACKER FRIENDLY

Ouya isn't just tolerant of hackers; it is practically encouraging them. The hardware itself features standard screws so that anyone can open up the casing and modify the insides, and it won't even void the warranty.

STORAGE

8GB of flash memory is present for storing downloaded games, but that could fill up very quickly. Those not willing to use cloud storage will have to attach extra memory or a hard drive via USB.

FOUR CONTROLLERS

Ouya originally supported two controllers but, after feedback from fans, this was increased to four in order to encourage more same-room multiplayer gaming.

ETHERNET

Though Ouya was originally intended to only support Wi-Fi, the creators added an Ethernet port in response to backer demand. Online play should now be much more stable as a result.

OUYA TECH SPECS

■ Tegra 3 quad-core processor ■ 1GB RAM
■ 8GB flash storage ■ HDMI out at 1080p
■ Wi-Fi 802.11 b/g/n ■ Bluetooth LE 4.0
■ USB 2.0 ■ Android 4.0

Ouya's hardware engineer, Muffi Ghadiali, discusses the engine at the heart of his new console



$99 is such a competitive price for Ouya. How have you kept the production costs down?

We're using standard industry hardware. This approach is just one example of how Ouya has challenged the thinking that has guided the console industry until now. Consoles don't require a custom chipset and expensive development tools any more. Technology has improved and it's more available and powerful than ever before. Because we bypassed the custom chipset, we don't need to pass additional costs onto consumers.

Why did you choose the Tegra 3 processor and how is it optimised for Ouya?

With Tegra 3, we can offer performance without significantly driving up costs. By integrating a current product rather than a future product, we have an advantage in that we know exactly how it performs, and can get developers working on Ouya as soon as possible. The Tegra 3 has been traditionally optimised for mobility and battery life. Since Ouya is a console that's always connected to a power supply, that's not a concern for us. We can increase graphics performance, and gamers will experience higher-fidelity graphics and smoother performance.

What can you tell us about the developer environment on Ouya?

Ouya will use industry-standard development tools, based on what exists for Android. By using an established standard, we are immediately accessible to the millions of developers familiar with Android today. Over time, we'll add more.

How has feedback from Kickstarter backers influenced the finished design of the console?

It's unique that future customers can weigh in on a product in development, and Ouya is especially lucky because our backers are largely comprised of both gamers and game makers. It's an informed audience with really insightful feedback. We don't take their comments for granted. We are always looking at feedback and making decisions based on where we are in the product development cycle. Some examples of areas where we took feedback include Ethernet – we added a port – design of the D-pad, and button markings, to address colourblind gamers.

WHY I PLEDGED $10,000 TO OUYA

A total of ten people or companies have backed Ouya on Kickstarter's top tier of $10,000. **games™** spoke to four of them to find out why

" OUYA IS THE exact type of project I love to support on Kickstarter. It's not just a project, but a means to allow other creatives to release more work. It's an enabler for creativity and that's something I want to see happen. Over the course of the last year, I've donated over $150,000 into indie games and projects, nearly $50,000 of that through Kickstarter from *Double Fine Adventure*, *Wasteland 2*, *Republique*, *Takedown* and *Z*. All individual titles that I believed in on a conceptual level, but Ouya was different in the fact that I saw it as our best means as indie designers, to enable us to change how we deliver and even design our games for a new audience, so I put my money where my heart was. "



ROBERT BOWLING
President, Robotoki

"It's not just a project, but a means to allow other creatives to release more work"
Robert Bowling



BRIAN FARGO
CEO, inXile Entertainment

" PART OF MY reason for excitement lies in my history of seeing something like the hobbyist success of the Apple II. Clearly it is a very different environment now, but putting technology in the hands of the crowd will often generate applications and ideas that no one company ever could. It only takes a couple of killer apps to get people excited enough to buy new hardware. And having a large variety of games to choose from at all times is a killer app in itself. This is part of the reason why a dedicated handheld like the 3DS or Vita has no chance against an iPad or iPod touch. And when you start looking beyond just games you can envision, there will be other things the Ouya can do like providing an inexpensive way to stream movies. I was one of the first big backers via Kickstarter and I was working with Ouya months before launch. We had much discussion about the tiers and sensibilities of it. "

" WE'VE BEEN DOING this a few years now. HandyGames see ourselves as pioneers of new platforms, and when we saw Ouya we thought we had to be there. We have a strong belief that mobile or the Android ecosystem will be one of the most important for getting a huge global reach, and one of our big business models is having free apps for the user. I think this is where the fit comes in. Ouya is Android-based, it's playing free games, and we see a huge potential for it to compete against traditional consoles, which don't really do free games, aside from a little try-before-you-buy stuff. So I think the market there is very interesting for us because there is no barrier at all. If you're an Android developer like us, [...] it's very important because we don't go mobile-only. We have a multiscreen, multiplatform strategy at HandyGames, so if I want to be on the TV today it must be over my smartphone or iPad, over smart TV or over consoles like the Ouya. "



MARKUS KASSULKE
CEO, HandyGames

"We need something like Ouya, which may just be the first of many such devices"
Mark Kern



MARK KERN
CEO/CCO, Red 5 Studios

" THE BUSINESS MODEL of games has to change. The distribution of games has been controlled by a select few in the console world, and it favours only huge games with big risk, leading to staleness and boredom. Ouya tears down those barriers and democratises distribution on a console. That will lead to new ideas and innovations and less risk to try new things. Even if it does not succeed, it won't be because of its idea, but its execution. We need something like Ouya, which may just be the first of many such devices. We are interested in the platform for a number of reasons, and wanted to make sure we were able to get a dev kit. We're willing to invest more, and have a few ideas on how we might support the platform. "



It's Brian Fargo who offers the most common sense perspective, though. "Ultimately," he says, "we all know it comes down to install base, and if enough get out there you will see the exclusives come."

Make no mistake: the challenge of getting consoles into the homes of millions of people is the biggest and most important challenge of Ouya. Without this, developer support will trickle away, exclusive games will never appear, interest will wane and Ouya will be nothing more than an interesting footnote in the history of gaming. Yes, the Kickstarter campaign has been a huge success, but that success is relatively small out in the real world where huge advertising campaigns, the ability to get on store shelves, and the backing of big publishers means everything. When even Nintendo is struggling to get more than just third-party ports on its new system, you have to wonder what Ouya's post-Kickstarter plan entails.

"Ouya tears down barriers and democratises distribution on a console" Mark Kern

Uhrman acknowledges the need to take the Ouya business to the next phase following its launch in March, but is vague at best about how she intends to accomplish this. "Delivering on the day one units is just the first step in building a phenomenal games console with great content, and every single day we're doing that," she promises. "We haven't finalised our build-a-market strategy or the marketing of Ouya specifically. Right now we are focused on delivering a great product to our early backers," she adds when we press for more details.

Thankfully, Ouya's supporters are more forthcoming with what the console needs to do to compete with the wider games industry. "Again, it always comes down to killer apps, and don't forget having a controller gives a different choice than that of tablets or iOS," says Fargo. "Everyone was excited about the PSone because of *Ridge Racer* and that built momentum. Maybe there is a special version of *Minecraft*. Who knows? It doesn't take much."

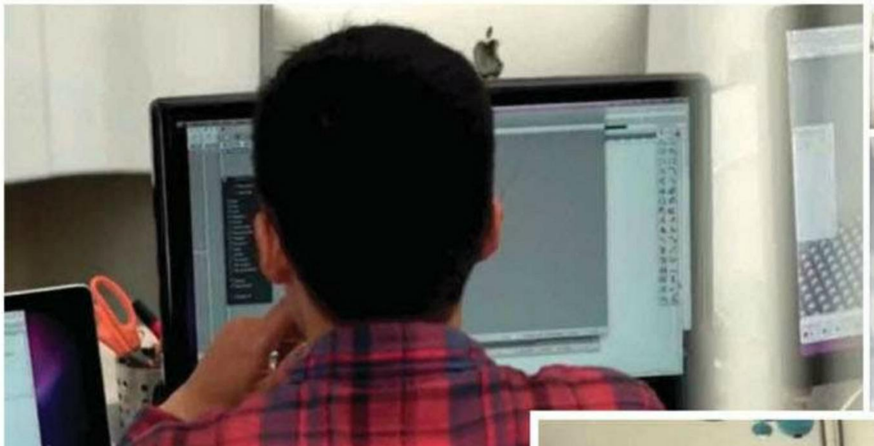
Kassulke agrees. "A game is not a success when it's released; it's a success when people play it and love it for a long time," he argues. "It's the same for Ouya. It's not about putting the device into retailers and getting a lot of sales. In the long run, success will only come if the users love it. If it's not supported by good games or if the user experience is not good then it will not be a success."

Kern, however, sees things from Ouya's perspective and recognises that just preparing for the March launch is a mammoth task in itself. "Getting a console together is no easy thing. You have to write a stack of software for it, support developers with APIs, and make sure you can get your hardware properly engineered and ready for mass production. You also have to manage your outsourced manufacturing to the quality level you need. These will not be trivial things, and their schedule is very aggressive. I hope they don't ship something too early, or fail to manage expectations about how long it might really take to produce. For us, the key thing will be the software and the user experience. It has to be perfect, simple and easy."

There are a number of hurdles that Ouya needs to tackle before launch, including ones that even Apple and Google have yet



Another example of Ouya listening to its backers, the O, U, Y and A button labels were added to the controller after numerous suggestions from fans.









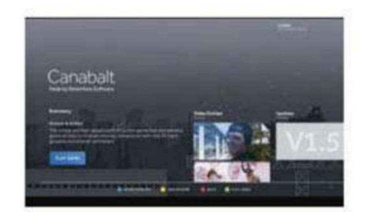
The team behind Ouya is a group of industry veterans with experience at IGN, OnLive, Microsoft and Amazon, among several others.

to overcome, such as the problem of discoverability, for example. "It doesn't help indies to see *Angry Birds* at the number one spot for year after year," says Fargo. "Let's rotate and come up with more creative ways to put new and quality titles in front of people."

"That's something we're currently vetting, and coming up with our strategy," says Uhrman. "But one thing we know we can rely on is that there is a world out there that exists where there will be hundreds of thousands of pieces of content. Knowing that as we go into this is to our advantage."

Uhrman's answer is another reassurance backed up with few, if any, solid details, suggesting that the problem isn't being taken so seriously. Again, it's the developers who offer more detailed solutions. Markus Kassulke suggests that content filtering and a rotation system should be employed in addition to user reviews, but also adds that the relatively small size of the user base may turn out to be an advantage to developers in the first few months. "One of the demands of Ouya will be that the games have to support the platform and the gameplay mechanics from the controlling side," he says. "So there will not be every Android game there from the beginning." Fargo agrees: "With a smaller base it can provide for a better chance for discoverability. So many iOS games launch into that sea of noise and sell 20 units. There are always trade-offs."

And what of users looking to circumvent the Ouya store altogether by hacking the device? "Really great developers and publishers have already put their content on Android devices and Ouya is going to be just as secure," says Uhrman. It's not especially reassuring, given that Android is notorious for being one of the most hacked and pirated platforms on the market, but Ouya's hardware engineer, Muffi Ghadiali, justifies the vulnerability as a trade-off for openness and creativity. "Hacking and openness are about getting to do what you want to do with the hardware," he says. "We embrace hackers because we expect that they will push the limits of the hardware beyond what we've imagined. Rooting the device won't give you any more access to the games themselves."



A mock-up screen of the Ouya UI shows unconfirmed game *Canabalt* available in the console's store.

Another preconception that's going to be tough to crack is the stigma attached to free games. News that every game on Ouya will have some free component will certainly help in the initial marketing of the console, as the idea of paying $99 and nothing else is an attractive one. But the reality is that many free-to-play games will really be 'freemium' – initially free games that require in-app purchases in order for the player to progress or stay competitive. Even John Romero, currently working on his own free-to-play games at Loot Drop, has commented that if all games are free "you have to basically make a microtransaction game to make any money on it".

Could Ouya become a console flooded with the sort of unenjoyable 'pay to win' games that have given iOS and Facebook a bad rep? Uhrman asserts that the business model actually emphasises quality. "We think free-to-play really aligns gamers with developers because the developers have to make great quality content that gamers are going to want to purchase," she says. "The only rule on Ouya is that every game has to have some sort of free element. But the developer can choose whether they want to offer in-game items as microtransactions, or a subscription, or a demo in advance of a fully paid version. Developers are creative geniuses and we trust that they will find a solution that works for them."

Through all of this, many of the problems raised are on a software level: the functionality of an app store, piracy protection, game design versus monetisation. It's a far cry from the concerns of previous generations, when all anybody cared about was the power under the hood. It's an indication of just how much the games industry has changed in the wake of Wii and iPhone, though raw power is still obviously a concern for some. At the heart of Ouya is Nvidia's Tegra 3 – a quad-core

"We embrace hackers because we expect that they will push the limits of the hardware beyond what we've imagined"

Muffi Ghadiali

OUYA'S LAUNCH TITLES

The good, the bad and the exclusive

Though Ouya currently only has a handful of titles confirmed, what has been announced is a decent cross-section of what to expect from the console in the future. Indie titles sit side by side with established franchises, across a variety of genres and free-to-play business models

HUMAN ELEMENT PREQUELS

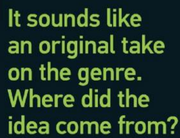
Former Call Of Duty dev Robert Bowling discusses Ouya's first exclusive game

You've announced that *Human Element* will be a survival horror game, but what form will the Ouya-exclusive prequels take?

At this point we're not limiting the genre of the prequels as this is really our chance to innovate through experimentation on what's possible and really allow the feedback and play styles of the audience to shape each episode. Overall, the common thread of defining survival will connect each episode, however the gameplay mechanics of each will differ based on the focus of the episode and time period after the event occurs.

Can you give an example of one of the ideas you're considering?

Episode one could take place a day after the event occurs, when it's most chaotic, and could be focused on breaking contact with the human element, getting out of the populated areas and the means to finding a safe haven to fortify. Focusing on making that escape and fortification fun and meaningful then moving into episode two, with that as a backdrop but switching the focus to the drama of dealing with other survivors, scavenging supplies, and preparing for rebuilding.



How is *Human Element* different to other survival horror games?

The first thing is, this isn't a game about zombies. It's a focus on the human element after an event like an apocalypse occurs, how our definitions of what it means to survive change based on our individual identities. We approach this by basing your entire experience around your identity, who you are, and how you want to live.

This is determined by three main factors. What are you? [Are you male or female?] Who is with you? Surviving alone, surviving with another adult, surviving with a small child. How do you survive? Are you action-focused, intelligence-focused, or stealth-focused? These basic characteristics will define the scenarios that make up your individual story, which we plan to deliver to you dynamically as you survive in this world.

It sounds like an original take on the genre. Where did the idea come from?

The inspiration for this came when I was writing a novel called *The Parent's Guide To The Zombie Apocalypse*, and I realised that my zombie survival plan has changed drastically as I got older and had kids and started a family. My very action-focused 'survive at all costs' mentality no longer applied, things I was prepared to do before changed, my fearlessness for confrontation faded, and I realised just how unique your individual scenario makes your plan, and we aim to make that an interactive experience and really examine how survival means more than your own physical wellbeing.



FINAL FANTASY III

A PORT OF the iOS and Android release, which in turn was a port of the 2006 DS remake of the 1990 Famicom game. Ouya's *Final Fantasy III*, unbelievably, marks the first time Square's classic RPG has appeared on a home console in English, which is justification enough for its existence. The Ouya version will be very similar to the Android edition with the added bonus of renewed controller support and a free demo. Square Enix has also announced that it is considering other games for Ouya.



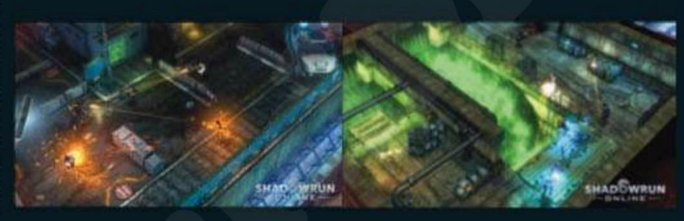
GUNBLITZ

UNTIL CAVE OR Treasure announce a game for Ouya – you never know! – shoot-'em-up fans will have to make do with this, a retro-style side-scrolling shooter from Rapture Game Studios in Fort Wayne. It's a port of an indie PC game, due to be released this September, and there's a playable demo available now from **rapturegamestudios.com**



MANOS: THE HANDS OF FATE

RECENTLY RELEASED ON iPhone, *MANOS* is a faux-NES game designed to ape the way lots of Eighties games made virtually no sense and brought together tons of different scenarios, locations and enemies that had nothing to do with each other. It's a great retro platformer in its own right so will work well with Ouya's control pad.



SHADOWRUN ONLINE

AT THE TIME of writing, this *Shadowrun* MMO is almost funded on Kickstarter with mere hours to go, but work-in-progress screens indicate that this game is very far along in development and is likely to be completed regardless of the Kickstarter results. The game looks very true to the *Shadowrun* RPG universe, and news that the game will feature cloud saves, allowing you to take the progress of your Ouya game on the go with a tablet, is welcome news indeed.



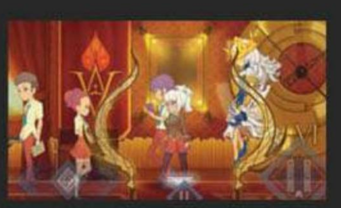
LEGENDS OF AETHEREUS

AN ALWAYS-ONLINE fantasy RPG that includes a single-player campaign within an MMO framework as well as incorporating co-op and arena-based combat. When this Kickstarter success exceeded its original target by $2,500, the developer used the money to get an early Ouya dev kit in order to port over *Legends Of Aethereus*.



SKI SAFARI

AUSTRALIAN DEVELOPER Defiant Development has announced plans to port all of its games to Ouya. *Heroes Call*, a *Diablo*-style RPG, will be among Defiant's two launch titles, which also include *Ski Safari*, a fun, almost Nintendo-like platformer in which you try to out-ski an avalanche using increasingly silly means. It's currently one of the most popular games on iOS so will be a welcome addition to Ouya, along with the rest of Defiant's catalogue.



RIVAL THREADS: LAST CLASS HEROES

ANOTHER KICKSTARTER success that used the extra money to grab an Ouya dev kit and pledge developer support. *Rival Threads* is a side-scrolling RPG with some of the nicest visuals we've seen in an indie game. The developer claims to be inspired by Vanillaware, the Japanese studio behind *Odin Sphere* and *Muramasa: The Demon Blade*, so *Rival Threads* will presumably work best with an HDTV screen and proper controller.



SATURDAY MORNING RPG

AN EPISODIC RPG that draws upon references to classic kids' cartoons of the Eighties, *Saturday Morning RPG* will follow the same model as it did on iPhone where the first episode was made available free, with the remaining episodes available as in-app purchases. The iOS edition was reviewed in issue 124 of **games™** and scored a respectable 6/10.



OFFENSIVE COMBAT

A NEW FPS from a team of ex-Activision employees, *Offensive Combat* is about as far from *Call Of Duty* as you can get, thanks to its silly sense of humour, typified by an abundance of daft avatars that players can choose to play as. If you want an early taste of this intriguing shooter, the web version is due to go into open beta any day now.



SUPER RETRO SQUAD

JAY PAVLINA FIRST came to our attention with his incredible web game, *Super Mario Crossover*, which took famous 8-bit characters and made them playable within *Super Mario Bros*. For his follow-up, Pavlina is dispensing with the copyright-infringing IPs and going his own way with an original game, featuring nine different characters across 50 or so levels.



AQUA RHAPSODY

IT MAY NOT be the most exciting announcement, but the clay-modelled visuals of this indie protect-the-castle shooter give a great indication of the sort of creativity and indie sensibility that is sure to be prevalent on Ouya.

SAVE THE PUPPIES

HANDYGAMES HAS CONFIRMED to **games™** that it hopes to convert all of its games to the new system. At the top of its wishlist, however, is *Save The Puppies*, a puzzle game about a sausage dog who keeps getting longer. Sold!



GUNSLUGS

A *METAL SLUG*-STYLE run-and-gun game with blocky pixel graphics, macho Eighties pop culture characters and *Spelunky*-style Roguelike elements. What's not to like?



GRAVE STOMPERS

A 3D ACTION brawler that pits zombies against even more zombies, this mobile title has a sense of humour to it that reminds us of Namco's Famicom game *Splatterhouse: Wanpaku Graffiti*, which is no bad thing. If the Ouya game is anything like the Android/iOS title then expect to use in-app purchases to customise your zombie and buy extra weapons.

> "The television is the last screen that smaller developers have essentially been locked out of"
>
> Brian Fargo

'system on a chip' that provides great power cheaply and in a compact space. It's currently the processor of choice for a number of gaming-focused Android devices and is an obvious choice for Ouya, especially as its affordability is crucial to the $99 price point. Yet some detractors question whether the processor is future-proofed, given the fast-moving nature of technology and the fact that Nvidia's Tegra 3 successor is planned for around the time Ouya releases next March. So why not use that chip?

"We need developers working on our machine pretty quickly," Uhrman counters. "Behind the scenes we are moving now so that games will be ready for launch. We've seen a lot of people commenting that they're sceptical about Tegra 3, but there is a broad range of power-heavy games running on Tegra 3. I think that people don't realise they're speaking as consumers who are experts on their own mobile phones, but when you remove the screen and don't have to balance battery life with performance you can really do a lot more."

She may have a point, but then there's a difference between comparing Ouya to other Android devices and comparing it to other consoles sitting underneath the TV set. When the next Xbox or PlayStation come along in the future, they're almost certainly going to feature bleeding-edge hardware capable of incredible visuals. Where will that leave Ouya then? Can we expect the business to follow the Apple model of releasing new and improved, yet backwards compatible, hardware on an annual basis? Whenever we ask Uhrman about this the conversation is steered back to the launch period. "I have definitely been in talks where we discuss how this evolves, but it's not appropriate to share publicly right now," she adds.

So, many doubts hang over the long-term viability of Ouya, but right now, in the period of anticipation between the console's Kickstarter success and its intended launch in March, it's important to remember the core strengths that made it such an enticing prospect to begin with. A library of free-to-play games. The support of great indie developers and big publishers. Streaming PC games, courtesy of OnLive. An open system that allows anyone to create games for it, unlike any other console. And that magic price point of $99. On paper, there is so much potential to this upstart of a system, and it's exciting just to watch it evolve and see what happens next.

From the way developers speak to the outpouring of consumer support for Ouya, it's clear that this is about more than just a games console. It's about opening up the barriers to console development so that anybody can make a game for the TV, not just those studios with the money to buy expensive dev kits and licences. And this is something that will ultimately benefit gamers as well as developers.

"It's really designed to be a tool for players to find and experience games they may have never been exposed to another way by bringing an ever-growing independent developer community into the living room the same way the app stores did for mobile," says Robert Bowling. "It's opening up the playing field of the living room to an all-new set of teams, which will disrupt players' expectations and give them a lot of experiences they're simply not getting right now."

Even if Ouya is not a long-term success, the people have spoken and made it clear that they want what Ouya offers. It's entirely possible that the likes of Valve or Apple may respond to those demands and do something similar and more successful in the future. But the need has already been acknowledged and the wheels set in motion. Ouya will get there first and therefore has a prime opportunity to capitalise on it.

"Even if it were to fail, we need more ideas like Ouya," says Mark Kern. "They have momentum now. The ball is in their court to accomplish this difficult task."

Fargo adds: "Ouya is a step forward for our industry to be more open, and that is what we all want to see. Succeed or fail, this is the kind of thing we want to see happen."

For Uhrman, of course, this isn't an ideological campaign but a serious attempt to enter a very competitive market by focusing on those core strengths, particularly the $99 price, which she is determined to stick to even when the console ends up on real store shelves. "Unless we can build it for cheaper," she says, "it will always be $99."



None of the games above are confirmed for Ouya but could all be ported with relative ease.

KICKED OUT

THOUGH OUYA has been a big success on Kickstarter, videogame projects jumping on the bandwagon by referencing Ouya support in the title have done considerably less well. Here's how they're doing at the time of writing on 13 August 2012.

SPINFERNO
OUYA & ANDROID EDITION
17% funded - $11,361 pledged
9 DAYS TO GO

ORBITAL BLASTER
AN ON-RAILS SHOOTER FOR iOS/ANDROID/OUYA
2% funded - $1,368 pledged
9 DAYS TO GO

OUYA GAME – THE BATTLE OF FOUNDATION
0% funded - $183 pledged
17 DAYS TO GO

SHAPES – ADDICTING FUN
FOR iOS/ANDROID/OUYA
37% funded - $367 pledged
1 DAY TO GO

ARMORED TANK ASSAULT 2
FOR OUYA/iOS/ANDROID/PC/MAC
Funding unsuccessful
PROJECT ENDED 27/05/12

MEAN GREEN MACHINE

With the advent of Ouya, Nexus 7 and a host of other Tegra 3-powered devices, Android gaming is finally getting serious. Console-quality games are to be made available at a fraction of the price and across a variety of compelling hardware variations. As such, games™ takes a look at the booming Tegra-powered Android market to find the best games available for the system

For some time now, Android devices have been considered the also-ran to Apple's iPhone and iPad, particularly when it comes to gaming. But that perception is slowly changing. One reason for this is the sheer variety of Android-powered devices out there. Where once the little green robot was all about the Google phone, it now extends into iPad-like tablets, laptops, rear-seat entertainment in certain cars and even, in the case of Ouya, a TV-based games console with the potential to compete with the likes of Xbox or PlayStation.

The other reason for Android's growing relevance is that, much like the PC scene of the Nineties, its open structure enables hardware manufacturers to compete, and this has led to a technological arms race in processors. Debate rages over which is the best, of course, but it's Nvidia's Tegra 3 that has seen the most success in the gaming space.

Currently found within the innards of the Ouya, Google's own Nexus 7 and the Asus Transformer, the Tegra 3 is a quad-core 'system on a chip' processor that appears almost entirely focused on gaming, enabling extremely impressive high-end visuals and the sorts of games you would associate more with consoles and PCs than the traditional mobile market. Dual-format iOS and Android games enjoy significant enhancements in their Tegra 3 incarnations, while Nvidia has thrown its weight behind those Tegra-enhanced games by opening its own app store and news site at **tegrazone.com**.

Of course, there are still a few hurdles for Android to overcome, and a lack of system exclusives is arguably its biggest. Most of the games featured over the next few pages are also available on or in development for other formats, but in most cases the Android versions are superior. And with even the most powerful hardware retailing for significantly less money than iOS devices or dedicated gaming handhelds such as the 3DS or Vita, they start to look like a very enticing gaming system, with or without exclusives.

If the hardware and infrastructure for high-end Android gaming continues to grow at this rate, the system is bound to become the next big gaming ecosystem, especially if and when Ouya takes off. With that in mind, **games™** presents a round-up of the most impressive Tegra 3 gaming devices and the best games heading their way.



WIKIPAD

HALFWAY BETWEEN a tablet and a handheld games console, Wikipad is a Tegra 3-powered tablet that comes with its own custom, detachable controller to better enjoy the console-style games currently being developed for Tegra systems. As well as HDMI out and USB support, the ace up the Wikipad's sleeve is full compatibility with streaming service Gaikai. The latter's partnership with Sony had cast some doubt over the launch of this new tablet, but Wikipad's vice president of communications, Mike Cuff, reassures us that the device is still on track for a September release and that a new and improved controller has been created too.

GAMING POTENTIAL: ★★★☆☆

ANDROID GAMING HARDWARE

All of the systems on this page are Tegra 3-powered Android devices, capable of playing the best games on the platform. But with each taking a very different approach to usability, some are potentially better for gaming than others



HTC ONE X

ONE OF the more traditional Android offerings, the HTC One X might not be especially optimised for gaming, but it's a powerful piece of kit in a very small form factor, only an inch or so bigger than a credit card and sporting an attractive 720p HD screen. As a mobile phone, its multitasking nature and potential to pay by contract make it an obvious choice for gamers looking for an all-round solution.

GAMING POTENTIAL: ★★☆☆☆



NEXUS 7

A PHENOMENALLY popular tablet, co-developed by Asus and Google itself, the Nexus 7 has one significant ace up its sleeve: its price. At £159 for the basic model, this is an extremely attractive proposition, and though that's still much more expensive than Ouya's planned price, it's worth remembering that Ouya has no screen of its own and is therefore not portable. The Nexus 7's size, somewhere between a phone and tablet, delivers a great combination of portability and power. Only the lack of physical controls diminishes its appeal.

GAMING POTENTIAL: ★★★☆☆

IDEAPAD K2

THOUGH IT'S yet to have a release date or price confirmed, don't expect Lenovo's high-end tablet to be affordable at all. This is a serious bit of kit, with a stunning 1920x1200 screen, an HDMI port, four onboard speakers for 3D sound, and plenty of expansion ports. The addition of a fingerprint scanner for added security suggests this is aimed at business users more than gamers, but there's no denying the potential here for something that straddles the tablet, console and laptop markets. At a huge cost, of course.

GAMING POTENTIAL: ★★★★☆



ASUS TRANSFORMER

ASUS'S LINE of Transformer tablets have proved extremely popular with power Android users and are especially handy for gamers. The newest model, dubbed Transformer Infinity, boasts a 1920x1200 screen in 16:10 aspect ratio, making it fantastic for console-style games, while the optional keyboard adds physical controls and extended battery life plus a USB port and SD card slot, 'transforming' the tablet into a full laptop. At £599 it's extremely pricey, but it may also be the most future-proofed device when it comes to high-end Android gaming.

GAMING POTENTIAL: ★★★★★

OUYA

You should have already read our in-depth feature on the Ouya this issue, but for those who haven't, the short story is that this is the world's first Android-compatible games console. Its killer app is that an SDK comes with the machine, allowing anyone to develop for the system and publish games through Ouya's own store. The incredible price of just $99 makes it irresistible. If Ouya can achieve its ambitious goals, it stands to revolutionise the videogames market.

GAMING POTENTIAL: ★★★★☆



THE TOP 5 GAMES ON ANDROID RIGHT NOW

Android devices, particularly those in the Tegra 3 family, already have some fantastic console-quality games. Here's our pick of those available right now





DEAD TRIGGER



PUBLISHER: MADFINGER GAMES DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

THIS ZOMBIE-BASED FPS is one of those 'I can't believe it's running on a mobile' games and looks so good that it's one of five titles that Google chose to show off at its Nexus 7 unveiling earlier this year. Though it's also available on iOS, the Android version is superior for a number of reasons. First of all it's free, making it a whole 69p cheaper than its iOS equivalent. That isn't that big a deal, we must admit. But complaints about clumsy touch-screen controls are alleviated on Android thanks to the option of physical controls, while the game simply looks that much better on Tegra 3 devices, which add post-processing effects, advanced lighting and ragdoll physics.





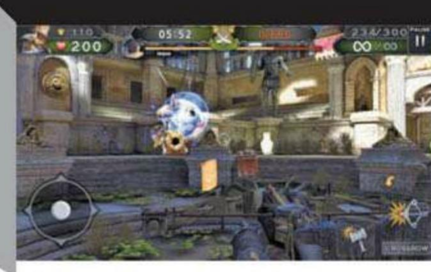
RIPTIDE GP

PUBLISHER: VECTOR UNIT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE





AS AN OLDER title, *Riptide GP* makes use of the less powerful Tegra 2 rather than 3, but it still looks rather lovely, particularly in those all-important water effects, which not only look realistic but behave that way too. The game also features fantastic controller support, allowing you to use either a Bluetooth or USB controller to sidestep those dreaded virtual touch-screen inputs. Developed by the team behind XBLA's *Hydro Thunder Hurricane*, this is a classy little Jet Ski game that rightly emphasises fun over simulation. It's not quite *Wave Race 64*, but until Nintendo decides to put that game on 3DS, *Riptide GP* is the next best thing.





RENAISSANCE BLOOD

PUBLISHER: NCSOFT DEVELOPER: BRIDEA



THOUGH THE NCSOFT label has led many to mistake this for an MMO, much to their own disappointment, *Renaissance Blood* is actually pretty good when taken on its own merits. It's an on-rails shooter, inspired by *The House Of The Dead* and taking place shortly after the death of Da Vinci… or something. The plot doesn't really matter, though. What's more relevant is that this is a cool little shooter that also happens to be a genuine Android exclusive. Only available for Tegra 3 devices, it uses the quad-core processor to create extremely realistic lighting as well as in-game objects that can be interacted with on a physical level.

2 GRAND THEFT AUTO III

PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR GAMES DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE





TO SEE A PlayStation 2 game running on a mobile platform is impressive enough, but to see Rockstar's ambitious open-world innovator doing it is just gobsmacking, especially when the original graphics have been overhauled and redrawn at HD resolution as they have here. Though this tenth anniversary release is also available on iOS, it features a number of improvements on Android, including support for USB game pads and unprecedented Tegra 3 support. Rather than the usual mix of tweaks, *GTA III* contains the sort of options screen you'd usually see in a PC game, smartly acknowledging the open nature of Android and allowing the end user to tailor the game's visuals to their particular hardware of choice. Oh, and the game is still awesome, remember...

1 SHADOWGUN

PUBLISHER: MADFINGER DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



AS EPIC GAMES continues to impress on iOS, demand for a portable *Gears Of War* grows ever more passionate but, so far at least, the series remains exclusive to Microsoft devices. For now, *Shadowgun* will have to do. Good thing it's a very good game, really. The third-person shooting action is good enough that it has quickly become one of the most popular and most played games on Android, while the visuals live up to the 'console-quality' label that publishers are so quick to bandy about. There are actually two versions of *Shadowgun* available on the platform, one for Tegra 2 and one for Tegra 3, though we shouldn't need to explain which is best.





SELF-CONTROL

What to do if your Android device lacks those all-important buttons



CONTROL IS ONE of the biggest issue plaguing mobile games, particularly those looking to re-create the console game experience. Thankfully, it's less of an issue on Android than it is on iOS thanks to the fact that many Android devices now have physical controls built in, while others feature support for Bluetooth or USB pads. One of the best such devices is a co-development between Nyko and Nvidia, which have worked together to create a full-size pad called PlayPad Pro, designed to be a standardised 360-style controller for tablets, as well as the smaller PlayPad, which is more for mobile phones and includes 3DS-style analogue sliders for ease of portability, along with a dock to house said phone. Handily, Nyko has also created a free app called Playground, which allows either PlayPad to work with older games not necessarily designed with controller support in mind.

AN INSIDE LOOK AT TEGRAS 4, 5 AND 6, AND THEIR SUPERHERO-INSPIRED CODENAMES

■ Though Tegra 3 is the CPU that's appearing in all the latest Android devices, the fast-moving nature of computer hardware means it won't be too long before it's superseded. It's no surprise, then, to hear that Nvidia is currently working on a follow-up. In fact, it's working on three, to be produced between now and 2015. Here they are, complete with the tech specs we know, and their codenames based upon Marvel and DC Comics superhero aliases.

WAYNE
Quad ARM Cortex-A15 MPCore
Improved 24 (for the quad-core) and 32 to 64 (for the octa-core) GPU cores with support for DirectX 11+, OpenGL 4.X, and PhysX 28nm HPL

GREY
Quad ARM Cortex-A9 + low-power companion core 28nm HPM
Integrated Icera LTE100/HSPA42 baseband

LOGAN
Quad ARM Cortex-A15 MPCore + low-power companion core
Improved 28nm GPU core

STARK
Unknown ARMv8 (64-bit)
Improved GPU core

x80
x70
x60
x50
x40
x30
x20
x10

Q1 2013 | Q3 2013 | 2013 | 2014



FORTNITE IS NOT WHAT MANY EXPECTED FROM EPIC GAMES, ESPECIALLY OFF THE BACK OF ITS MULTI-MILLION-SELLING GEARS OF WAR TRILOGY. PROMISING A "GAME FOR EVERYONE" AS WELL AS USING THE NEW IP TO OFFICIALLY SHOWCASE UNREAL ENGINE 4, IT IS, ARGUABLY, ONE OF THE RISKIEST PROJECTS THE STUDIO HAS TAKEN ON TO DATE. GAMES™ TALKS TO EPIC GAMES PRODUCER TANYA JESSEN TO INVESTIGATE

WHEN MINECRAFT MEETS GEARS



OF WAR

For one reason or another, Epic Games has decided to be deliberately coy about its latest project, Fortnite. Seemingly borne out of the success that was *Minecraft*, it is the first high-profile game to try to emulate the foundations of what Markus 'Notch' Persson created, even if the developer claims many other influences. "*Fortnite* has inspiration from a lot of different places," producer Tanya Jessen tells us. "Working with *Fortnite*, we're making a game that a lot of us always wanted to play, so that's always a big inspiration for us. As for the building and scavenging elements, it was really about getting people with different types of personalities playing together, and that's not something you've seen a lot of in the games space: getting people who love RPGs, character upgrades and customisation playing with people who love shooters or the combat. For us, *Fortnite* was an opportunity to get people playing; they want to play together because it was built as a co-op experience. I could play with my cousin or my brother, and even though they're different from me in terms of our sensibilities, we could have an awesome time together."

In many ways, this is a mantra Epic has been pushing for some time. While they lacked the diversity or variety that *Fortnite* is promising, the *Unreal Tournament* games were multiplayer-focused shooters – community and team-based gameplay was key. The same premise was more than apparent throughout *Gears Of War* too, the single-player campaign giving way to a structured co-op experience topped off with a competitive deathmatch component designed to keep players coming back. With that said, there was a very distinct thread running through those games, not least the art style, opening up the question of whether Epic runs the risk of having to win its loyal contingent over once again. As Jessen reasons, though, "I don't really think *Fortnite* is a big departure for our fan base, and the proof will be in the pudding when we put it out there. This is definitely a long-term project for us, so when people who are fans of our other games give this a try there's definitely going to be things from our other games in there. A big part of that is going

Title: **Fortnite**
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **TBA**
Developer: **Epic Games**
Release: **2013**

● The line between *Fortnite*'s building and combat isn't as clear as some expected. Although things are more dangerous by night, there's still fighting during the day.

"FORTNITE IS A DANGEROUS WORLD, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER IT'S DAY OR NIGHT"

back to our pedigree, the shooting experience like with Horde – that's all going to be a part of the moment-to-moment experience with *Fortnite*. It's not even a concern for us. Definitely the art style is different and it's not more of a traditional experience like *Gears*, but I still think people who love *Gears* will love *Fortnite*."

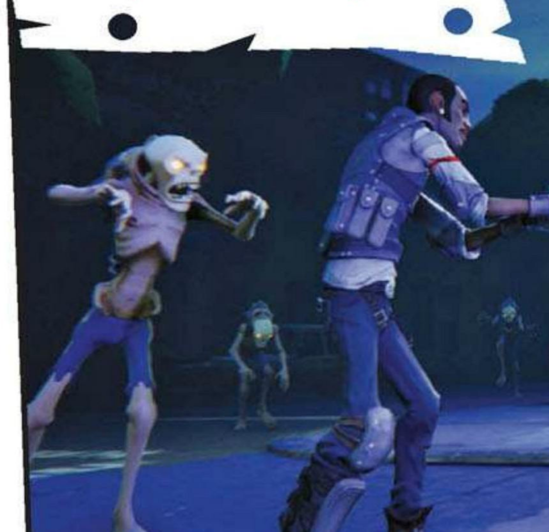
Bizarrely, this statement has some weight to it. In an effort to appease its potential future community and present a game that doesn't scare away those who obsessively follow the steps of Marcus Fenix, *Fortnite* wants to incorporate the best elements from shooters, RPGs and other popular genres in order to create a hybrid experience that keeps its audience locked in. A difficult task, undoubtedly, but one Epic is committed to achieving. The question is, then, how a game can incorporate such different elements without losing focus. One way is by sleeping through the night, a tactic that *Minecraft* fans will be familiar with, essentially bypassing the more aggressive ingredient of the game entirely. Even then, however, combat isn't restricted to when the sun sets, existing at all times to appease the *Gears Of War* type who actively seeks out battle.

"The thing is, *Fortnite* is a dangerous world, regardless of whether it's day or night," Jessen explains. "Whether you're scavenging or whether you're fighting is really dependent on your play style, and that can be during the day or during the night. It's just depending on when you do it there are different risks or rewards. It's not as binary or black and white that you're doing one thing by day and another by night. You're actually making choices at all times of the day. It's much more about player choice and how they want to approach the world. If you choose to seek it out, regardless of the time, you can. But if you want to avoid it and be a lot more strategic because you're more about upgrading your structure and building something really cool, that's something you can do as well."

It's not just a basic method either, with Epic keen to highlight the customisation options that will be available, ranging from the items that can be found to how they affect individual play styles. Upgrade a crossbow with electric bolts, for example, and you can then stun enemies from afar, leaving them in a prime state to be attacked by characters who are set up better for combat. This goes further from an exploratory point of view too. A grappling hook can be added to the bow to access areas that are impossible to reach without it, an idea not too far removed from a concept recently showcased in *Gears Of War: Judgment*. It also works both ways, with fort-building, while clearly owing a lot to *Minecraft*, boasting incredible depth, enabling you to go out into the environment and create pretty much whatever your imagination will allow. Once more, these fortresses can be destroyed, meaning you can't just build a bare bones house and expect it to hold out – it's all tied in to the threat facing you and your party: the Husks. Described by their creators as being creatures that once lived but had life sucked from them through some "greater force", it's this almost magical entity that will be explained further as you progress through the game; the zombie-esque creature will constantly hunt you



● The visual style is consciously different to what Epic is known for. Given how *Gears* defined UE3, it'll be interesting to see whether *Fortnite* impacts the direction of UE4 games.



with the sole task of ceasing your existence. To date, only one breed from the tribe has been revealed: the Troll. Resembling *Gears'* Ticker just a tad, Trolls use portals to bypass walls and, in turn, open doors for other members of their clan to just walk through. To add insult to injury, they'll also attempt to steal any loot that's been scavenged.

In another departure from the norm, Epic plans to extend what's possible in the game as the months pass, falling back on many evolving staples that allow MMOs to remain up to date; it also provides the justification for why, at the time of writing, *Fortnite* is a PC-exclusive title. As Jessen says: "For *Fortnite*, having a really flexible platform where we can continually update and take feedback from the community to make changes was a big part of why we decided to initially bring it to PC. The platform has a faster turnaround and [allows] quicker feedback from the community. We want it as accessible as possible too, because we want PCs that are out there today to run *Fortnite*. We really want people to play together, so it's important that you and your friends can and you don't need a super PC to do so."

This year's E3 may have been the official stage for Epic to unveil its Unreal Engine 4 to the expecting masses, but no one was quite sure what game would be chosen to back it up. In the past, mammoths such as *Gears Of War* have taken on that mantle, so discovering that *Fortnite* is officially the technology's showcase, complete with its cartoony visual style, is certainly a curveball. It's a testament, mind, to what Epic knows the engine can do. Rather than lean on the sheer power of what's under the hood, it's how user-friendly its technology is becoming that the studio seems intent on shouting about, and an area that Jessen continually comes back to. "The name of the game for *Fortnite*," she says, "is really that everything is being designed as a foundation that can be built upon, and it's constantly flexible. That's one of the reasons we went with Unreal Engine 4 as our game engine. Originally we had prototyped the game in Unreal Engine 3, but with the new features being implemented in UE4, we realised it allowed us to be a lot more flexible. It put a lot more power into the artist's and designer's hands to create a totally dynamic world."

Much like *Gears Of War* was inspired by and created out of what Epic's previous engine was capable of,

'I CAN'T BELIEVE THEY MADE THAT'

The games that set Epic apart



JAZZ JACKRABBIT

A CARTOONY PLATFOMER inspired by *Sonic The Hedgehog*? Surely such a piece of work could never come from the minds now responsible for a list of core shooters? As we all know, though, it did, specifically from the mind of one Cliff Bleszinski. With its cute visuals and lovable lead character, it's almost a precursor to the road that Epic is now taking with *Fortnite*. And, let's not forget, unlike his peers, Jazz liked nothing better than shooting enemies in the face.

FIRE FIGHT

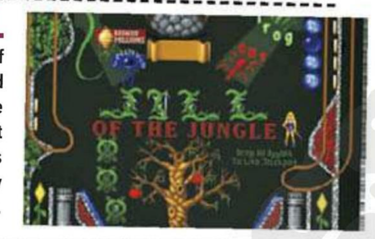


MORE OF A surprise due to how few people are aware of it than the content itself, *Fire Fight* was an isometric shooter for Windows 95. Following the journey of a pilot named Jaxon who extinguishes the evils that exist on other planets, it's not a million miles away from, say, Marcus Fenix's adventure set in a fictional, alien world. Unsurprisingly, in 1996 its sprites and lighting were considered far beyond what many other games were capable of producing.

AGE OF WONDERS

CO-DEVELOPED ALONGSIDE Triumph Studios, *Age Of Wonders* was another isometric offering from Epic that switched tracks to the fantasy genre. Laying its foundation in a turn-based model, it merged familiar role-playing elements with strategic gameplay and is still fondly remembered by many today thanks to how different each experience could be.

EPIC PINBALL



A FONDLY remembered title from the shareware era of gaming, *Epic Pinball* did everything the name suggested it would do. With a range of tables that played very differently from one another, it bucked the trend of many of its competitors by not feeling stilted or overly frustrating. Admittedly a few tables threatened to fall into the latter category, but Epic proved how adaptable it could be and how talented the company was.

SHADOW COMPLEX

AS EPIC continued to grow and cast its net over other, smaller development studios, it was intriguing to see its name behind Xbox Live Arcade's 'Metroidvania', *Shadow Complex*. Harking back to the games of yesteryear with a level of skill and polish that was more than impressive – even if Nolan North did sneak his way in there – Epic's decision to support Chair Entertainment's project was a smart one.

INFINITY BLADE

MARKING EPIC'S debut on iOS, again thanks to Chair, the company left many jaws slack after showing how powerful Apple's devices could be, not to mention giving Unreal Engine 3 yet more clout. Reaching levels of success that other mobile games could only dream of, *Infinity Blade* now sits pretty as one of iOS's heavy hitters.



GEARS OF WAR



COMBAT

● UNTIL WE get to sit down with it and actually go hands-on, we have to take Epic at its word, but it assures us that, much like Horde, the core combat ideals we've come to expect from many of its games will be present in *Fortnite*. If it genuinely wants to appeal to both the shooter and RPG markets, it'll have to be top drawer.

LESSONS OF THE PAST

● *FORTNITE* WOULDN'T exist in its current guise as a predominantly co-op, multiplayer experience if it wasn't for the lessons Epic has learned through its *Gears Of War* trilogy. From the first iteration to the last, the studio took huge strides in making it operate more cohesively, resulting in its next title being designed with that in mind.





CHARACTER CUSTOMISATION

● NATURALLY, THERE are far more games than just *Team Fortress 2* that offer some kind of customisation options, but the way Epic seems to be focusing in on persistent characters means there's definitely a similar vibe between the two. If Epic can introduce half as much depth, it'll be onto something special.

TEAM FORTRESS 2



ART STYLE

● *TEAM FORTRESS 2* doesn't look the way it does just because Valve decided to go down a different path. While it was probably a fun aside to the project, it was the developer's way of ensuring that the art style held up as time went on, regardless of how long it decided to keep supporting it. Epic has noticed how well that continues to work.

SCAVENGING FROM THE BEST

MINECRAFT



THEY BOTH STARTED ON THE PC

● AGAIN, ANOTHER seemingly moot point, but while Epic boasts *Fortnite*'s PC exclusivity, there's simply no way XBLA or PSN won't want a piece of the pie should it reach the number of people that those behind it hope. *Minecraft* eventually made the jump to the 360, and its accomplishments continue to grow.

LOOTING MATERIALS

● AS RIDICULOUS as that may sound, even Epic would be hard pushed to argue it hasn't been heavily inspired by the indie success story of the decade. With a focus on hunting down loot and materials to build almost any structure that manifests in your brain, the core of the experience owes a lot to *Minecraft* and its foundations.

THE DAY/NIGHT CYCLE

● EPIC MAY be keen to point out that combat can happen at any moment, but the day/night cycle is also taking place over in the *Minecraft* camp. Furthermore, players who don't want to involve themselves with the heightened threat once the sun sets can simply fast-forward their way through to dawn.



FORTNITE WILL GROW

● ALONG WITH its success, the reason *Minecraft* has managed to have such long-lasting appeal is the way Mojang has listened and adapted to its community – the ever-evolving world keeps pulling people back. As such, Epic seems ready to follow suit, promising plenty of post-launch plans that will serve its players.



"THIS PIXAR LOOK MEETS TIM BURTON WITH A THROWBACK TO LOONEY TUNES"

Fortnite's adaptable nature seems to be the same, even if the end product is drastically different. The developer has already shown that when it's time for visual strength it can deliver in spades, but the accessible nature of its new engine may be what, once again, continues to make its software an incredibly popular piece of middleware.

"A good example of this in *Fortnite* is we've got the dynamic skybox," Jessen continues. "So the programmers set up the ability to change the night sky colour and the animating clouds, but as soon as that's done, they hand it off to the artist and they get to determine the textures, shaders and sounds, like when the sun sets what lights turn on in the streets. When the sun rises, are the birds tweeting? The clock in the middle of the town that tells the actual in-game time – that's all done by the artists themselves and that's been a really great thing for us."

The aesthetic, which, in the words of Jessen came from "the idea of this Pixar look that meets Tim Burton with a little bit of a throwback to the stylistic effects of *Looney Tunes*" at one time was designed in a more traditional Epic Games style, the world being dark and destroyed, the Husks far more frightening than the finished article. Rather than being bogged down by the "depressing" look that most shooters now opt for, *Fortnite* is Epic's direct antithesis to it, the same mechanics lying beneath with a few new surprises to boot, another of which could be the arrival of microtransactions. With *Fortnite* not scheduled to arrive until 2013, Epic is constantly narrowing down the best way to bring it to market. Nothing is official yet, but given that characters can be customised and will be constant throughout an ever-changing environment, it suggests, at the very least, that such a setup is being considered. Regardless, Cliff Bleszinski has pitched *Fortnite* as a "slow burn" – a game being developed with longevity and post-launch support as a major backbone of the experience.

At its heart, though, is an entity that highlights the growing that Epic has done as a company. "As a game developer we're learning something with every product we put out there, be that gameplay-wise, system-wise or connectivity-wise, so there's certainly a lot of learnings that we've taken that we'll be applying to *Fortnite*," Jessen reveals. "There isn't one thing that I can point to and say 'Yes! [That'll be there, though]' [laughs]. Really, *Fortnite*, like all the games we make, is just a game we want to play, and we're taking our past experiences and applying it to that."

So while there are no chainsaws or curb stomps, *Fortnite* is firmly borne out of Epic's past, debatably the game that could mark the developer's entry into more diverse territory. The studio will still need to do a lot to ensure that its usual community is interested, but it's almost a necessary evil in order for the company to spread its wings further than it has done previously. Whether that's possible is a question for next year, but this is a far riskier project than Epic has chosen to take on for some time. If it succeeds, what's possible and expected from the company could shift quite dramatically.

● We know that characters will be heavily customisable, suggesting at least some level of support for finding – or buying – new kit for your avatar.

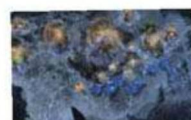
RETURN OF THE KING

Five PC exclusives that signal the platform's comeback



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: MISTS OF PANDARIA

● Despite losing some subscribers recently, *World Of Warcraft* still boasts over 9 million players, who are desperate for new content. If you want to get involved, there's only one platform that offers a way in.



STARCRAFT II: HEART OF THE SWARM

● Another expansion admittedly, but it comes down to the legacy Blizzard has built. Anyone who was counting down the days to *StarCraft II* would pick this up over anything else in 2012.



DOTA 2

● An RTS game that embraces the free-to-play model that is growing in popularity with each passing day, Valve will push session-based multiplayer content too. Expect its fan base to treat this as a second life.



GUILD WARS 2

● Adopting free-to-play even before it was considered popular, *Guild Wars* is rather unusual in the MMO space, the narrative changing depending on how the player interacts with the world. The upcoming sequel promises to be something special.



MECHWARRIOR ONLINE

● Piranha Games has seen fit to adopt the ever-growing free-to-play structure as well as take the mechs outside the usual 'do nothing but shoot at other robots' template. It's certainly not the most obvious project, but it is interesting.



SURVIVAL OF

Crytek takes another step into the future as it continues to evolve the first-person shooter in Crysis 3. Taking a trip to the studio's Frankfurt headquarters, games™ falls prey to a hunter reborn

It was inevitable that Crytek would eventually stumble over its own reputation. From the moment the German developer shot out of the gate in 2004 with tropical first-person shooter *Far Cry*, it set the knees trembling of every PC purist who marvelled at the retina-blasting visuals on display. That's largely due to the proprietary CryEngine, which in turn enabled *Far Cry*, *Crysis* and *Crysis 2* to churn out lifelike yet fantastical vistas that had the propensity to topple modest PC setups.

But as the console generation continues to lumber onwards, the studio has found itself either holding its own against fellow top-tier developers or outmatched and outgunned in every way – because, frankly, unless you're DICE, no one really gives a damn about how immaculate your pixel-sniffing engine is. Still, in *Crysis* the studio has found itself a franchise that has more than enough potential to offer something other than an empty vessel to embellish with pretty scenery, taking the first-person shooter to outlandish extremes in a genre where po-faced machismo and flag-waving jingoism reign supreme.

Sure, last year's *Crysis 2* got a lot wrong, but it couldn't be accused of not making the most of its setting. Doing justice to its location, it represented New York City as the shimmering epicentre of an intergalactic invasion, walking players through the tourist guide of the city's highlights before decimating the iconography of the Big Apple with gleeful aplomb. As a facsimile it could hardly be faulted, but it was – pardon the pun – a far cry from the franchise's roots, with players shackled to a street-based grid structure that considerably constricted the ability to skulk in the shadows, power-slam enemies and optimise the power of the franchise's USP – the Nanosuit.

But it's easy to forget that, on paper, the sequel was something of a risky proposition. *Crysis 2* was Crytek's inaugural console release, engulfed in envious hyperbole and representing the first union between the central Frankfurt office and a little band of Nottingham merry men, formerly known as Free Radical Design. With the franchise returning two years after the last entry, Crytek is eager to demonstrate exactly what a super-suited soldier from the future can do with a bag of magic tricks.

>> "I think being involved in the *Crysis* universe does allow us to do things that other games can't," states lead multiplayer designer Adam Duckett rather matter-of-factly. "We do have the Nanosuit, we do have the cloaking ability, and



TITLE: Crysis 3
FORMAT: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
DEVELOPER: Crytek
PUBLISHER: EA
RELEASE: February 2013

THE FITTEST

we do have the super-strength and super-speed. That allows us to create a different experience. We've looked at the paving of the game and we want it to make you feel like you're powerful. That you are a badass, basically!"

Duckett is part of the Crytek UK team responsible for the multiplayer component of the game. When Free Radical was acquired by Crytek in 2009, the studio was put to work on the *Crysis* franchise immediately, bringing its illustrious design sensibilities, honed on the much-loved *TimeSplitters*, to a multiplayer mode that represented an alternative to the increasingly prevalent *Call Of Duty* template. However, Duckett and his team faced challenges walking into unfamiliar territory and working with the main European studio.

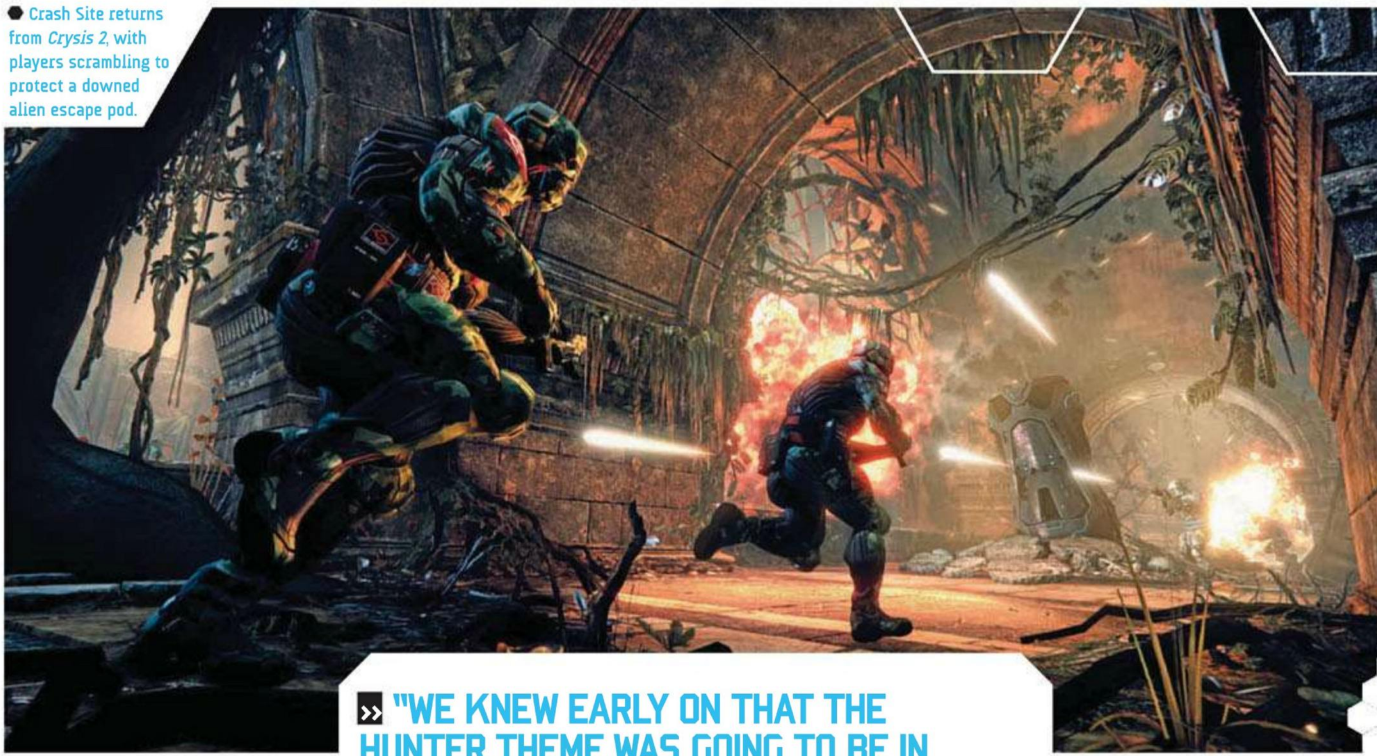
"When we came into *Crysis 2*, we were formerly Free Radical Design, and it was our first project with the CryEngine and working with Frankfurt and also working on the *Crysis* franchise," says Duckett of the early embedding period. "And so you have three huge things that you have to learn quite fast. A hundred new people, very talented new people, and it was a case of getting up to speed and producing a multiplayer component. And now we feel fully integrated into the Crytek family, we're working a lot closer, we're able to collaborate on ideas for the single-player and the multiplayer and bounce ideas forward, so what *Crysis 3* is becoming is more of a complete package. So you'll have *Crysis 3* multiplayer that will actually feel like an integral part of the game, and you'll see concepts mirrored across the single and multiplayer."

With the two studios having established a comfortable rapport working on *Crysis 2*'s production, the third part of the series therefore has proven a far more collaborative enterprise. The first task for the German and Nottingham offices was nailing a tone that would befit the superpowered brute hiding under the snug Nanosuit. If you've caught a whiff of *Crysis 3*'s early marketing push to date, you'll be more than aware that the whole shebang has gone a tad John Rambo on the sci-fi saga – a parallel most evident in the snazzy new composite bow that protagonist Prophet is wielding.

> "BEING INVOLVED IN THE CRYSIS UNIVERSE DOES ALLOW US TO DO THINGS THAT OTHER GAMES CAN'T"
> **ADAM DUCKETT, CRYTEK UK**

"The bow came about really because we were searching around for different themes," says producer Mike Read. "We knew early on that the hunter theme was going to be in there, but it was a question of what is the ultimate hunter weapon. When we thought about it and talked about actually being a hunter, we liked this hybrid between *Predator* and *Rambo*."

'Predator' is a word that crops up in conversation more than once during our time at the Frankfurt offices. More often than not, it's a casual buzzword that passes the developers' lips to emphasise the renewed focus on playing the hunter,


Crash Site returns from *Crysis 2*, with players scrambling to protect a downed alien escape pod.

but just occasionally it's used to reference that Eighties action movie wherein Carl Weathers got his arm blown off and Arnold Schwarzenegger outwitted an alien by rolling around in the mud.

To gain a full understanding of how Crytek has jammed to this theme – the stripped down man using cunning to survive a invisible marauder – we turn our attention to the multiplayer. In the new Hunter mode, two players are given a Nanosuit and a composite bow each and are tasked with hunting down the ten surviving CELL troops roaming around the map within two minutes. CELL troops get more substantial firepower and one radar grenade, but must face an invisible enemy that could be stalking its prey from any dark recess. The longer the CELL survive, the more points they claim, but after a CELL player is killed, they join the hunter force and must then track down previous allies.

"Whenever I watch people play, I always think, 'Are they enjoying it?'" Duckett muses after **games™** finishes a lengthy session of the mode. "And then, when you speak to someone afterwards, you can tell that they did. See, it's all the tension – all the stuff you don't see. And that's what we wanted to do. We really tried to play on the fear of the player. Then, on the flipside, once you are eliminated, you have the adrenaline rush of them becoming a hunter. It's trying to incorporate two different emotions and styles of play into one quick round burst. The feedback we've been getting so far has been quite positive."

> **"WE KNEW EARLY ON THAT THE HUNTER THEME WAS GOING TO BE IN THERE, BUT IT WAS A QUESTION OF WHAT IS THE ULTIMATE HUNTER WEAPON"**
> **MIKE READ, CRYTEK**

It's easy to see why. It's a nerve-shredding experience on the CELL side, with players either forming a solid unit to cover every angle or splintering off and finding an appropriate hiding place to wait it out. No one strategy could guarantee success, and the bleep of the CELL troops' proximity alarm as a hunter approaches is unremittingly chilling. In fact, it bears more in common with the template of another interstellar movie property than anything overtly familiar to the average *Call Of Duty* player.

"It has a certain *Alien* aspect to it," laughs Duckett when we note the similarity. "We looked at the Nanosuit and thought, 'How can we take the most unique aspect of *Crysis 3* and what can we do to bring that into a game mode?' And what's more scary than being stalked by someone you can't see?"

>> There's certainly more than a passing resemblance to the eponymous extraterrestrial that terrorised Arnie and chums back in the jungle. Heck, it could be more than passing if we find out Prophet is rocking a mean set of dreads underneath that fetching mask and ski goggles. But stylish hairdos notwithstanding, it's the way that both stalk their quarry, utilise the verticality of the environment and employ a stealth cloak to conceal their movements that set them apart from the military grunts roaming unsuspectingly on terra firma. Previous *Crysis* games have buoyed stealth gameplay by championing firearms that expand the sci-fi landscape, often encouraging the same hurried blasting of its genre contemporaries. But *Crysis 3* takes a slightly different tack. It's not quite trading in its NRA membership yet, but the aforementioned composite bow was an idea that the studio kept returning to during development that defined the tone of the title. "There was a whole slew of [weapons] that came through that we looked at," details Read. "The bow was a rejected concept that came back in at some point in the development process."

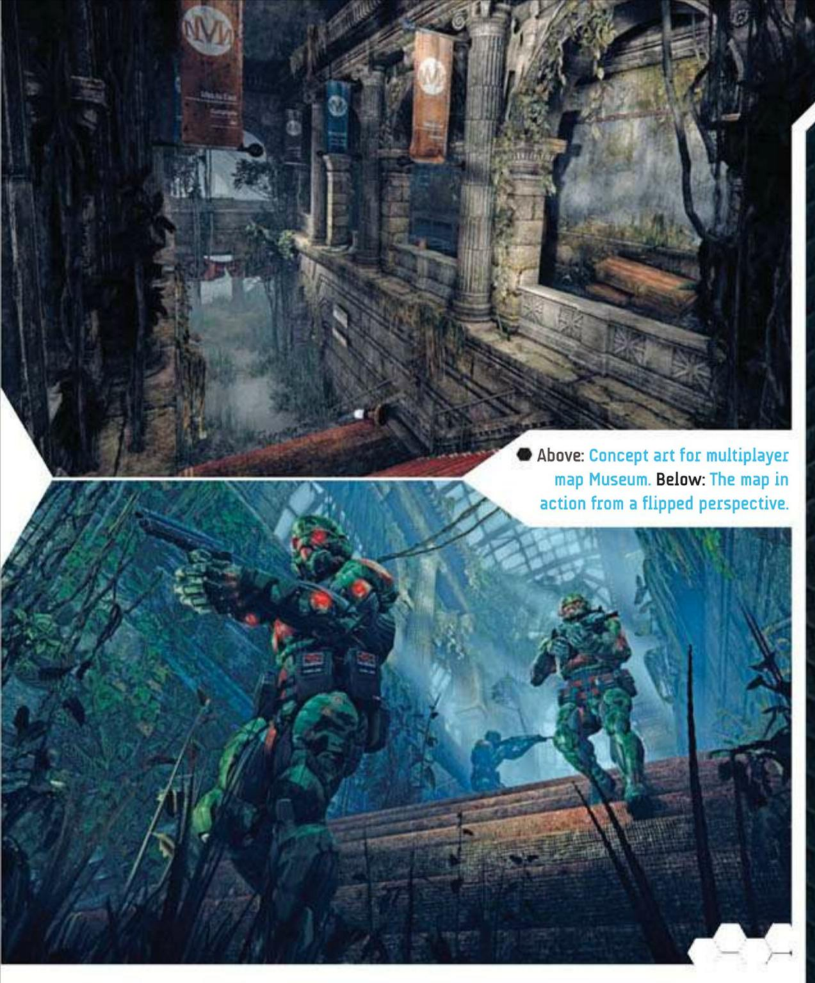
Still, while it seems a natural fit for the series, Read is uncertain how gamers will embrace the new weapon and, as we suggest it might skew towards more stealth-minded soldiers, he's quick to stress its versatility. "We're not pushing people towards doing that. In terms of how much do we think people will use the bow, I don't think there's an easy way to answer that question. You're going to have some people who are going to use it and play with it all the way through, others who will use it in combinations, and others who will sit back cloaked and pick guys off from a distance. Some of the stuff we've seen is guys are doing flying jumps with the bow and all sorts of stuff

COMMUNITY MATTERS

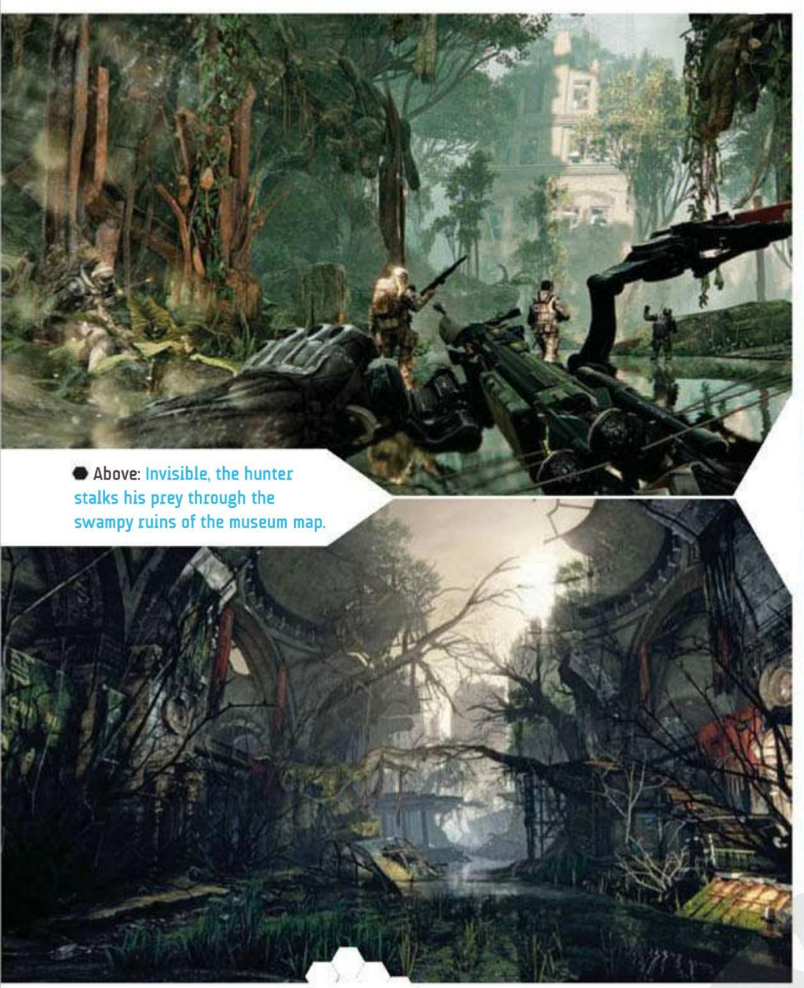
>> IN MUCH THE same way as *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* and *Battlefield 3* revolutionised in-game community interaction, *Crysis 3* introduces the New York Feed, which will keep players better connected

EA has become something of a pioneer when it comes to in-game community features throughout its major titles. *Need For Speed* set the ball rolling with Autolog, which enabled players to challenge each other, compare race times and exchange heated words without even exiting the main menu.

With *Crysis 3* adopting a similar format with New York Feed, producer Mike Read explains the renewed focus on community. "I've never been the achievement type in games," he admits. "But I've got friends who are like, 'I've got to find an achievement server and get on there and get these!' I'm like, 'Why don't you play the game naturally?' But people get obsessed with achievements and I think instead of everyone going for the same achievements back and forth, it's important to have dynamic achievements. It all lends itself to the competitive side of the game and that's really important."



Above: Concept art for multiplayer map Museum. **Below:** The map in action from a flipped perspective.



Above: Invisible, the hunter stalks his prey through the swampy ruins of the museum map.

RADICAL INFLUENCE

We talk to Adam Duckett, former Free Radical developer and now lead multiplayer designer at Crytek, about Crysis 3's competitive modes



How has the Nanosuit evolved since *Crysis 2*? Was there any particular element of the suit's design that received an overhaul?
Well, we haven't been afraid to look at energy management based on what works both for the single-player and what works for the multiplayer. We looked at the multiplayer Nanosuit and said, 'What's cool about it?' and, 'How can we make it work better in an online environment?' So you have the auto-armour module and the decoupling of sprint energy. So when you're running around today in *Crysis 2*, you're gradually eating into your armour deposit, whereas what we've done is we've said that people want to run around and want to stealth. We've kind of taken the shackles off and so you can do all that cool stuff, and when you get into a firefight you're still evenly balanced against that other player. That's really helped the new players coming in; we've noticed improvements in newer players versus more skilled players.

It's especially noticeable in Crash Site, as you run from one side of the map to the other. Previously you'd be too drained to hold back enemy fire, but this evens the playing field somewhat.
I think that was the thing with Crash Site particularly. If you died and then had to use all your energy to get back to the same point, you're turning up with a severe disadvantage over the guys just sitting there. So we ended up with that scenario in *Crysis 2*, and with *Crysis 3* we've just been able to alleviate those balancing issues so it's a cleaner, crisper online experience.

Do you feel the new setting is more versatile? There's certainly a greater sense of freedom to the map design.
What we've been able to do is have more power routes – more routes that require Nanosuits. So like the trees that go over the top on Museum. You can really bring in routes that people will find on their second or third play of the map, that they're like, 'Oh cool, how do you get up there?' and really expanding the level. We've created softer boundaries around the outside that creates these huge vistas. We've got some maps coming up that will really help to showcase that. It makes the player feel like they're actually in the *Crysis* universe and not penned into this multiplayer pit or arena and makes it feel very expansive.

Where did the concept for the Hunter mode come from?
The original idea was based on an old *TimeSplitters* game we worked on. It was the Gladiator game mode, where you had one player and you kill them and it flips them, and it evolved from that.

Success in the mode seems very dependent on the player reading their surroundings as much as anything else.
When you've got a swamp where you've got the flooding and its murky, you're almost trained to look out for the footsteps in the water. There will be other maps with similar elements, like long grass where you'll be able to see grass displacing and track them that way. So really playing into the environments that we've created to make the game mode feel more immersive and suspenseful.

How much of the Free Radical influence is present in *Crysis 3*?
I think there's a certain fun aspect to the multiplayer, which I think is based on the fact that there's a substantial amount of Free Radical guys there, and one of the things that the company is known for is bringing that fun element to games. Something we wanted to bring to the *Crysis 3* multiplayer is to give it a unique feel like our previous games have done, make it fun, make it feel fast, and make it feel enjoyable.

Is it difficult to make *Crysis 3* stand out as a multiplayer title?
Again, I think it's the uniqueness to it. We're never going to carve our way into the market by looking at what other games have done and producing a similar game. So you've got stuff like the rip and throw mechanic, the Pinger; you've got the cool Nanosuit abilities and you've got the Ceph, which brings in alien technology as one of the weapons. You've got cool things like going over to a street sign and being able to pull it out of the ground and then you've got a giant baseball bat with a lump of concrete on the end that you can use to clear the way instead of a gun. People can make those stories within the game because of the environment, and that particular superpower allows that stuff within our game world.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

How Crysis 3 is fusing together the best bits of the franchise

CRYSIS | CRYSIS 3 | CRYSIS 2

CHARACTER



THE FIRST entry in the saga had more of a squad mentality than the games that followed. While Nomad was the clear hero at the centre of the game, his supporting troops were distinctive enough to make this more than just a story of a lone warrior.



STRIVING FOR deeper characterisation, *Crysis 3* will feature familiar supporting players to interact with Prophet. *Crysis* and *Crysis Warhead* character Psycho has been confirmed to return, but there's also a greater reliance on Prophet's own abilities.



THE SEQUEL had a soldier stumble over the body of Prophet and take his guise. No surprise that it's a more solitary tale, with the hero relying on all his skill to survive the invasion. There was a pervading sense of disconnect from the rest of humanity.

MULTIPLAYER



CRYSIS SET the template for multiplayer in the series. Aiming to offer an alternative to the standard modes found in other shooters, its main focus was on Power Struggle, which pitted two teams against one another as they fight to destroy the opposition's headquarters.



ONCE AGAIN, new modes are at the forefront of the multiplayer experience. Crytek UK's Hunter mode serves as a perfect example of how to create engaging multiplayer experiences by making the best use of the resources at hand.



WITH THE former Free Radical team on multiplayer, there was no shortage of invention in *Crysis 2*'s online battleground. Understanding the potential of the Nanosuit and tailoring modes to exploit it made multi more than a throwaway experience.

LOCATION



THE LUSH tropical paradise, full of stunning vistas, offered a versatile stomping ground for the game's protagonist to conceal himself. It was the ultimate hunting arena that complemented both the gameplay and the stunning power of CryEngine.



THE GAME returns to New York, but the city has been ravaged by time. Buildings lie in ruin, vegetation has reclaimed much of it, and the Big Apple is divided into zones. This enables Crytek to apply the original's versatility to a recognisable backdrop.



AIMING FOR a more bombastic tone, the location switched to the towering skyscrapers and iconography of New York City. While Crytek took great pleasure in levelling the place, it was a more restrictive environment than its predecessor.

rather than just doing it with standard projectile weapons."

No doubt players will discover a logic behind this back-to-basics approach embraced by franchise stalwart Prophet, and what exactly he's doing roaming around the swampy depths of the sequel's setting. Crytek remains as elusive as *Crysis*'s star when it comes to plot specifics, refusing to confirm details outside the back-of-the-box synopsis. We do know that the story has Prophet – or whoever he is at the end of *Crysis 2*'s befuddling conclusion – returning to New York City some 24 years after the events of the previous game, discovering that the corrupt CELL Corporation has encased the American city in a giant dome, creating seven distinct and hazardous environments that players must venture through.

>> No doubt there will be more intricate deceits, technological theorems and plot twists to make up the game time, but Read is aware that *Crysis 2*'s convoluted storytelling had a somewhat divisive effect on players.

"Richard Morgan [sci-fi author and *Crysis 2* writer] had a great take and he's a very smart man," says Read in defence of *Crysis 2*'s writer. "Even when you read his books, he gets very technical and he loves that deep sci-fi element, and we had a lot of that in *Crysis 2* mixed in with the story. Now we have Steven Hall, and the one thing that the story guys really wanted to do that didn't really hit the mark in *Crysis 1* and *Crysis 2* is create a better connection with the characters."

One aspect of an effort to support deeper characterisation was the decision to employ actors rather than voices, improving physicality and the overall performance. "The one thing our animation and story guys wanted to do was hire actors for more than just their voices. We have their likeness, their movements, their faces – it's all of these things," says Read. "We've basically hired actors as a complete job. I think some people got really confused in *Crysis 2* with some of the technical elements and we got very techy with it, which was cool and it went very deep on a lot of things, but the story kind of got backed off a little bit and we get a lot of story questions from people. 'What happened in this?' and 'What happened with this guy? Where did he go?' There are answers to a lot of these things, and some of these things are going to come out in *Crysis 3* in delivering a deeper story."

While *Crysis 3* might not deliver the same visual sucker-punch as its predecessors, the environment is still undoubtedly the star of the show. New York has been completely transformed after the events of the last game, and this new mossy metropolis offered fertile ground for the developer to explore and return to the franchise's roots.

"With *Crysis 2*, we were very limited by having the city grid and dealing with that, and all the buildings were still intact," remembers Read, clearly chuffed at getting the chance to rip the city to pieces. "I think people who played *Crysis* felt *Crysis 2* was linear in more ways than one. People were responding by saying they felt really enclosed – it was like being in a tight space, where maybe you have many ways to go but it doesn't feel like it because of the visual reference. In *Crysis*, you had these places where you could swim around in open waters, so for us it was about combining both of those."

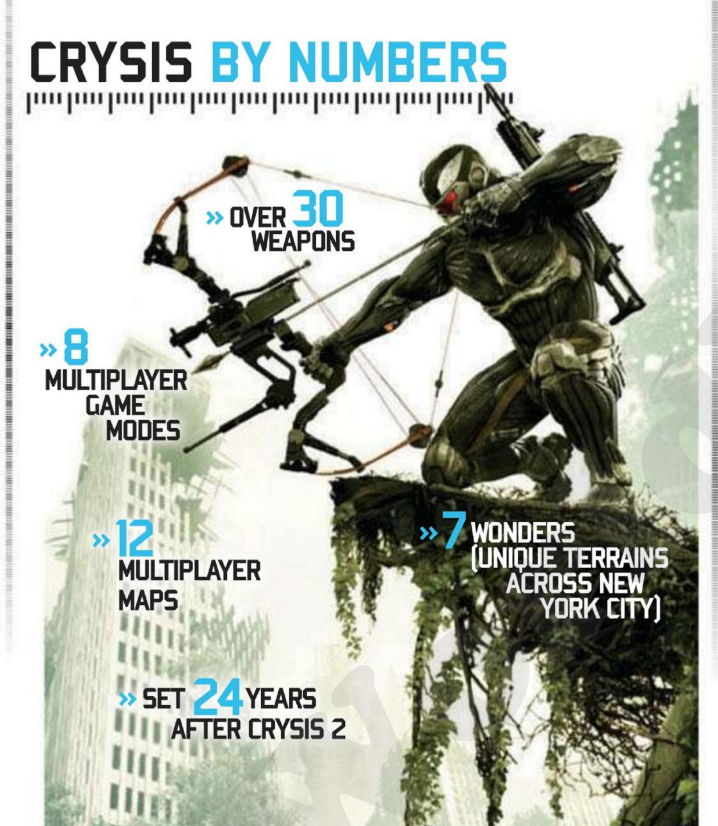


>> "IT'S ALL THE TENSION – ALL THE STUFF YOU DON'T SEE. AND THAT'S WHAT WE WANTED TO DO. WE REALLY TRIED TO PLAY ON THE FEAR OF THE PLAYER"
ADAM DUCKETT, CRYTEK UK

That's not to say that *Crysis 3* is an apology for its predecessor, but Read, who joined Crytek after *Crysis 2*, continues to highlight areas that the studio was less than content with last time.

"When I first played *Crysis 2*, it was like, 'Oh my god. I'm so overwhelmed. I've got this power bar, this cloak, all these things,'" he remarks, referring specifically to the multiplayer. "I think what the guys at the Nottingham office have done is create a little less of a barrier of entry, so that people don't get frustrated and creating a better learning curve."

CRYSIS BY NUMBERS



Part of this involves softer rules on the Nanosuit itself. Dispensing with some of the unnecessary complexity involved in the armour modules, players will now find Prophet able to run without eating into the armour energy, and the armour module itself will be automatically activated while under fire.

It's simple improvements to the fundamental mechanics that seem to make a world of difference in the sequel. Even the simple act of grabbing enemies – a franchise staple – has been giving a do-over, now offering more than just a cheap laugh as players chuck a turtle into the sea or, more effectively, an enemy over the top of a skyscraper. It's a gameplay feature that feels much more raw and scrappy, enabling players to tear car doors off their hinges and use them as an impromptu shield, or to rip signposts from the concrete sidewalk to wield as a makeshift melee weapon.

What it does is transform *Crysis* into a more streamlined and focused experience, enabling players to concentrate on the immediate intensity of the firefight and not fumbling around between Nanosuit abilities. In its own way, it has become perfectly evolved; a congruent blend of everything that made the first two entries such a success, with barely any evidence of the chaff that belittled the experience. There's a deeper, richer world at the player's feet and one that's uniquely designed around the prowess of the protagonist's superhuman abilities, rather than the latter being shoehorned into the former. It's nothing less than a leaner, meaner and significantly greener beast. And while it's no longer priding itself on its aesthetic muscle, there's little doubt that it'll pack plenty of punch.

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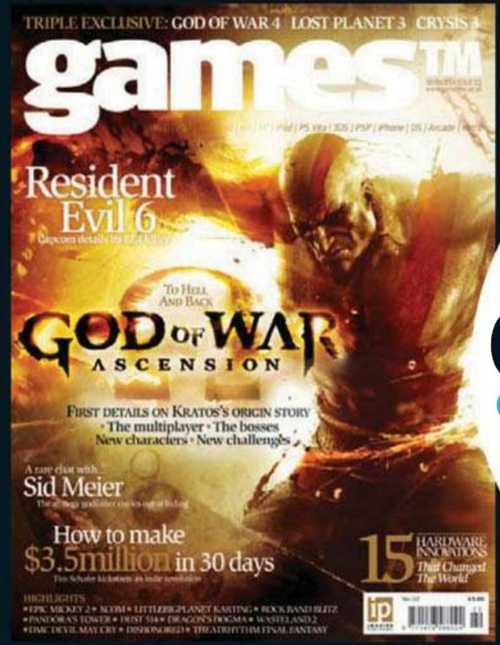
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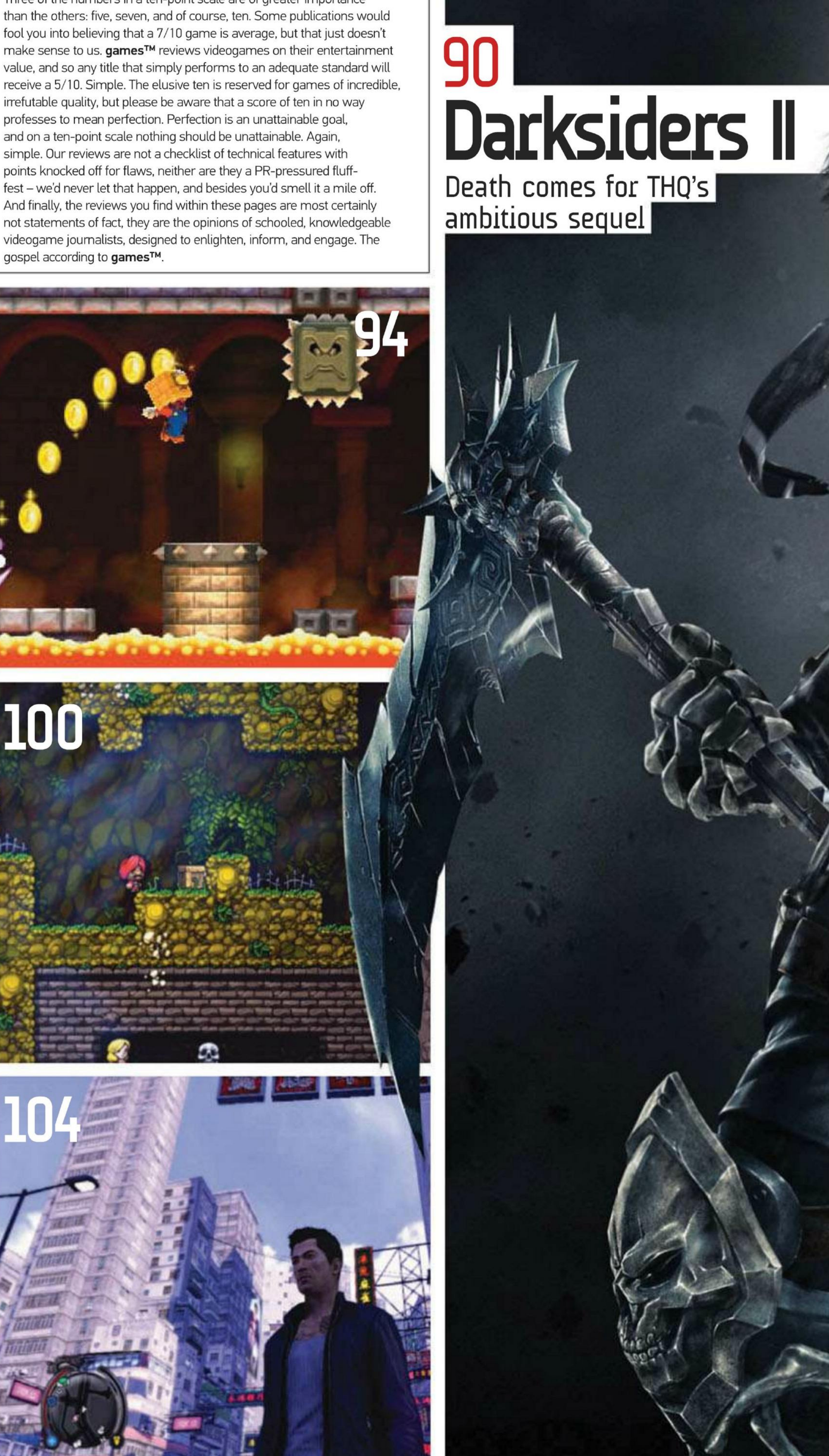
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Reviews

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.





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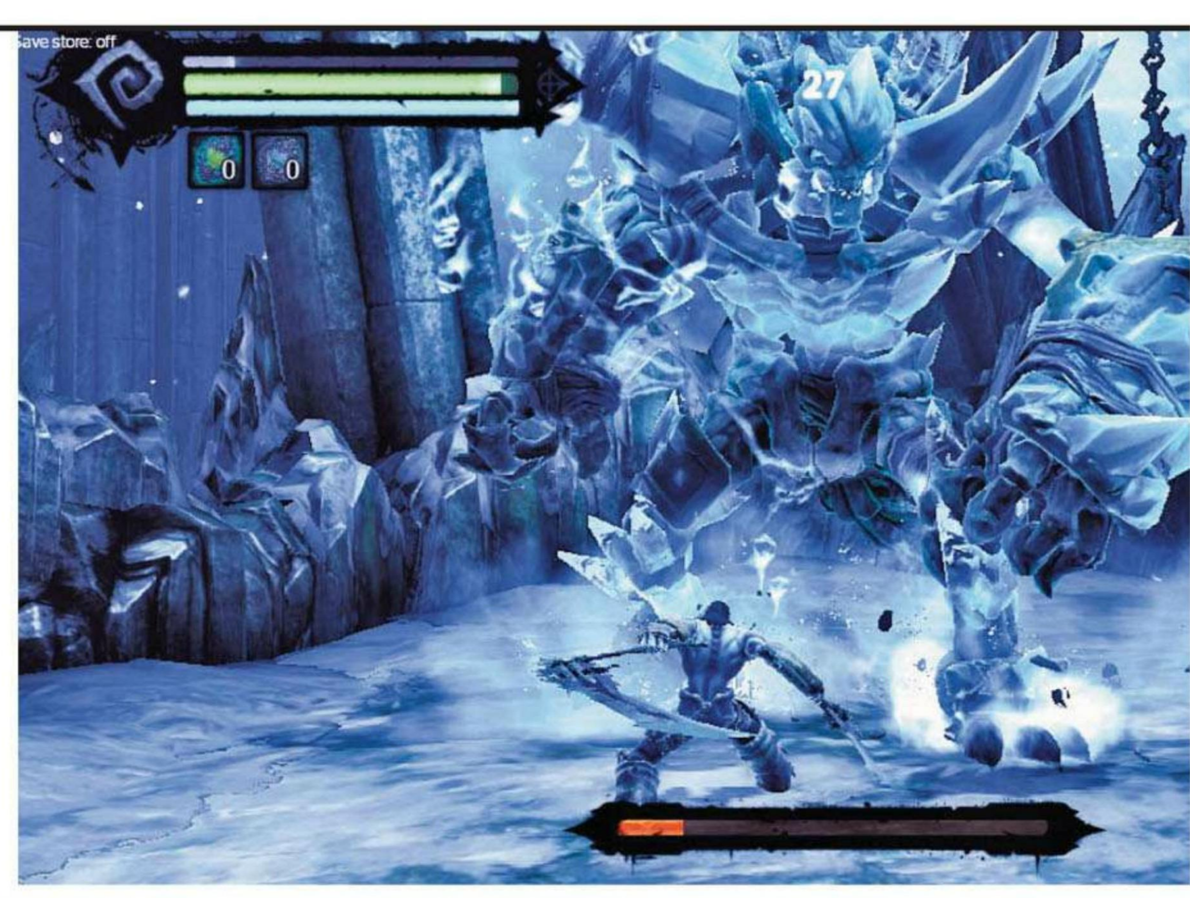
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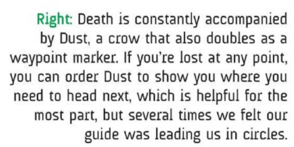
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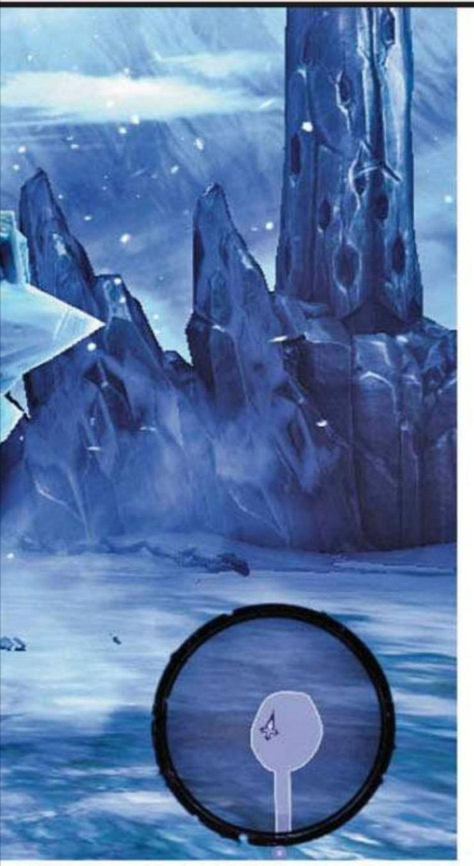
DEAD LEVEL BEST

Death has six main powers – plus two incredibly damaging attacks unlocked at level 20 – that can be upgraded throughout the game. Aegis Guard and Unstoppable increase Death's guard or attack respectively, Harvest and Teleport Slash cause Death to ferociously spin his scythes or launch them forwards, and Murder and Exhume enable Death to summon a flock of crows or reanimate the dead to fight alongside him. Each power has several augmentations, and within those there are three levels of upgrades. You won't be able to unlock everything, so selective upgrades are a necessity. It's not a foolproof system, though; we levelled up Exhume to the point where our summoned zombies would reap back Wrath energy for every attack, allowing us to repeatedly spam the ability during tricky combat situations.





Right: Death is constantly accompanied by Dust, a crow that also doubles as a waypoint marker. If you're lost at any point, you can order Dust to show you where you need to head next, which is helpful for the most part, but several times we felt our guide was leading us in circles.



DEATH IS THE GREAT LEVELLER

Darksiders II

DETAILS

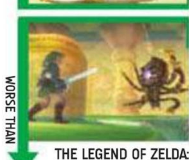
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC, Wii U (late 2012)
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Vigil Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

DARKSIDERS



WORSE THAN



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: SKYWARD SWORD

Death may be a leaner figure than his armour-clad sibling – the topless protagonist less a stocky mutant knight and more a sinewy ghoul right off an Iron Maiden album cover – but the game he's starring in is undeniably better built out.

Darksiders II – the somewhat less tangled but no less silly story of Horseman of the Apocalypse #2 as he attempts to undo the end of days and clear War's name – presents the same melting pot of borrowed ideas as its predecessor, but with a few extra ingredients thrown in to spice up the brew. Along with the *Zelda* dungeons, *God Of War* combat and Metroidvania item-collecting come the welcome additions of *Diablo*'s looting and *World Of Warcraft* RPG-ing.

It doesn't make for an entirely different experience – this is largely the same puzzle-heavy, dungeon-crawling, brutal hack-and-slash experience played out against Joe Mad's otherverse of angels, demons, nephilim and a race of Scottish-voiced Makers seemingly related to Shrek – but this time there's that extra tug of ever-increasing numbers pulling you through the world.

Death – a swifter and more agile version of his brethren – begins the game skinny and bare-chested atop an icy summit, with naught but a steed and a pair of twin scythes to his name. As you make your way from here to the Forge Lands, the Kingdom of the Dead, and some other generously sized overworlds that we won't spoil here, *Darksiders*' characteristic chunkiness begins to seep in, with a selection of oversized gloves, boots, shoulder plates, body armour and enchanted talismans to be found hidden within chests or dropped by foes upon defeat. The higher the stats, the bigger the armour, Death increasingly adorned with larger and spikier buckles, wraps, plates and flaps of ragged cloth.

There are always sacrifices to be made. Death's stats incorporate defence, attack, arcane ability, critical chance and a number of other attributes, each bolstered or diminished by the selections you make. It's often the case that items will undermine or counteract your decisions in other areas, so attempting to make a decision between two similar items, each offering a slightly different but no less worthy enhancement to your version of Death, can often leave you pondering for minutes at a time. Like *Diablo*, that perfect loadout always feels slightly out of reach, perhaps in just a few more defeated bosses and a couple more smashed chests. It tugs you through the game quite nicely, while adding a welcome layer of tinkering, two factors that keep *Darksiders II* from meandering into the same long stretches of repetitiveness that so mired its predecessor.

This said, it's nevertheless apparent that the mathematicians at Vigil Games don't boast quite the same mastery over the roll of the dice as Bethesda or From Software. Death is able to wield a variety of scythes, gauntlets, arm blades, oversized hammers and maces that deliver devastating amounts of damage, and for much of the game watching the small integers that emanate from every successful attack grow into huge, glowing storms of numbers in the thousands is an expertly orchestrated demonstration of how to keep combat that is largely rooted in button-bashing feeling satisfactory throughout.

However, there are problems. During our playthrough we concentrated on kitting out Death in such a way as to augment his critical damage and critical chance, while also supplementing the 'health received' stat upon landing these periodic critical attacks. Add to this a secondary weapon attained from the defeat of a boss that allowed Death to transfer the life force of his enemies into himself, and we found ourselves in a relatively unstoppable position several hours from the end of the game, constantly recharging our health bar mere seconds after any was lost. Even one of the

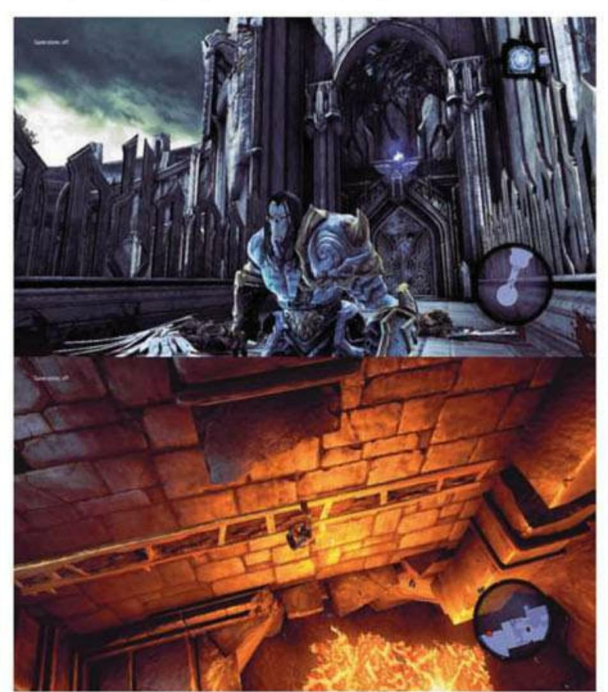
SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

GREATEST HITS: Like its predecessor, *Darksiders II* owes much to games that have come before. *Zelda* is the main inspiration, but there are also hints of *Diablo*, *Uncharted*, *Gears Of War* and more.

AMAZINGLY, WITHIN ITS 20 OR SO HOURS OF GAMEPLAY, DARKSIDERS II MANAGES TO NEVER BECOME BORING

Below: *Darksiders II* isn't the greatest-looking game out there, seemingly running on a slightly improved version of the first game's engine. The colourful, cartoon style does go some way to cushioning the game's brutal violence, though.



Above: Alongside the combat and puzzle-solving, there's plenty of platforming in *Darksiders II*, although it's hardly challenging. Grabbable ledges clearly stand out and scuffs on the wall display where wall runs are possible. It is fun, though, Death scampering across surfaces and ledges with speed.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS

You start off as a topless Death as he searches for the Crowfather. The numbers bouncing off enemies as your scythe makes contact already make for satisfying combat.

5 HOURS

By this point you'll no doubt be collecting three of some item or other, and Death will be adorned with bulkier wraps, gloves and body armour that tailor him towards your particular play style.

20 HOURS

If you've ignored most of the token side quests and hurried along the main path, you'll be coming to the end around now – if you haven't got stuck at some of the more devious puzzles, that is.

final bosses, which towered over Death, posed a negligible threat as we hammered our way through the encounter with little in the way of caution and gorged on his health. This isn't a situation that all players will necessarily find themselves in, and we were playing on normal rather than hard, but it nevertheless highlights the fact that *Darksiders II*'s action and RPG mechanics are not quite as well balanced as others in the genre.

Luckily, this is but a small complaint that only players who tackle *Darksiders II* in a very particular way will experience. Also, much like the first game, the combat is just a small part of what makes this adventure such an enjoyable play. It's the puzzle and exploration side that really elevates it.

The open-world map – or maps, more accurately – isn't much more impressive than the charred Earth of the first game, serving simply as ground to traverse when getting from one point to the next, and perhaps offering the odd cache of hidden item tucked away in the geography of the terrain. It's the dungeons – which do admittedly sometimes spill out into this open world – that are the real meat of the experience.

While they're not quite the otherworldly aberrations we had been promised – most dungeons here are simple castles, caverns or just that: dungeons – these are seriously large arenas, often taking up to two hours to complete thanks to elaborate level-spanning puzzles that draw from every part of your inventory. They're excellent imitations of *Zelda*; Vigil Games may have learned from the best, but it's learned well, with expertly crafted spatial brain-twisters that range from the simple to the outright confounding, and they're usually based around judicious use of whatever new item allowed access to that dungeon.



Early puzzles ask that you use timed, glowing bombs plucked from walls and ceilings to blast away the virulent 'corruption' blocking the path forward, while later conundrums will see you taking control of stone golems to activate floor switches. Later still, you can command Dead Lords to activate panels that you yourself cannot reach, or split Death into two apparitions, swapping between each of his halves to solve multi-step problems. Like *Zelda*, these are puzzles as much about limitations as they are abilities. You continually gain new powers that open previously inaccessible avenues of exploration, but it's how they can't be used just as much as how they can that defines your puzzle-solving process.

It's hardly *Portal*, although a riff on the Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device does once again make an appearance late on in the game, but these are still brilliantly crafted brain teasers, often difficult to the point of utter

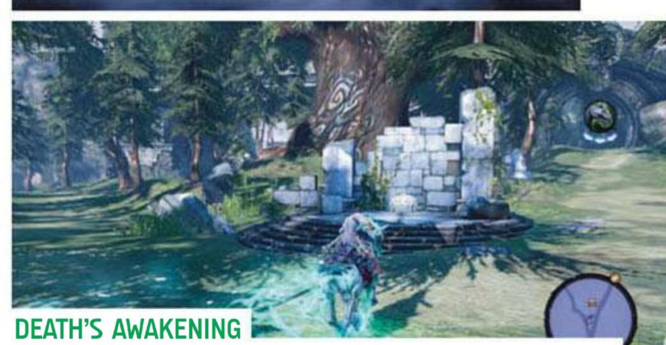
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DEAD GOOD: *Darksiders II* is far quicker at getting into the meat of the experience, and it doesn't drag thanks to the incentives of better loot and upgrades. The combat is faster and crunchier too.

Below: Possessed weapons can be upgraded by 'sacrificing' other items. Do this enough times and you'll have a very powerful weapon on your hands.





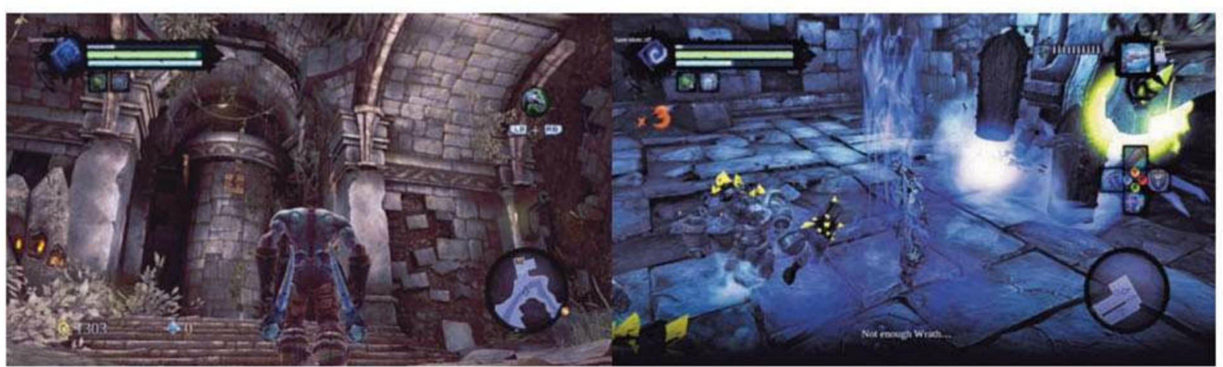
DEATH'S AWAKENING

Darksiders II features RPG-style hubs, but they're not a hugely prominent feature of the game. Early on you'll make repeated visits to the Tri-Stone and later to a floating barge towed by two serpents. Here you can purchase new moves to add to your repertoire of combos, buy items from merchants, or chat to the game's handful of characters that don't want to mash you into a gooey pulp. It's hardly *Skyrim*, though. These hubs offer slight respites from the action, and a few cursory side quests that might see you fetching hidden artefacts or killing off specific creatures, but Vigil Games is dipping its toe in the water of the RPG's non-combative aspects rather than diving in headfirst.



Left: There are several NPCs encountered and even dialogue options, but this is hardly an RPG on the level of *Fallout*.

Right: There's not a great deal to do in the open world other than traverse it, although there are some sights like this huge, corrupted eye guarding the way to the Tree of Life.



Left: Once powered up, using Death's Exhume skill triggers a flashy fireworks display awash with flashes of red, yellow and blue that looks nice, but is also overly busy, making it rather difficult to see what's actually going on with the combat.

confusion, but rarely unfair. If you're stuck, you know it's because you're missing something in front of your eyes, not because of something so obscure that you'll resent it when you find it. Don't go in expecting anything as deviously crafty as the Water Temple in *Ocarina Of Time*, but do expect to have your brain tickled with some cleverly thought out level design.

Boss and mini-boss battles are in abundance too, but it's something of a letdown that the majority encountered here are of the traditional hack-and-slash showdown sort and less of the 'solve this puzzle while being pummelled by a beast' variety. There is one rather intense encounter that demands the expeditious grabbing and hurling of sticky bombs; a battle that requires use of the harpoon analogue Deathgrip to grab and slam a writhing, snake-like creature to the ground; and an open-world QTE showdown against a *Shadow Of The Colossus*-esque giant stone skyscraper, but for the most part boss battles boil down to repetitions of X, X, X, evade, Y, Y, Y, and not a great deal else.

We've mentioned little of the story, given that there's little story to mention. The original was nonsense, but entertaining nonsense, brought to colourful, violent life by Joe Mad's bulky and decorative art style. There's plenty of that aesthetic here, although it fares better in some places than in others – we're looking at you, Makers – but the story underpinning it feels less developed than the crossings and double crossings of the original game.

Darksiders II is little more than a series of MacGuffins, Death first commanded to reach the Tree of Life, then find the Well of Souls, then the Stapler of Almighty Destruction – or whatever ominous-sounding object it is you're being sent to after that; you'll likely have tuned out by that point. Within these over-arching tasks, you'll find Death is repeatedly sent after three items – lost souls, horns, undead court members – and at one point even sent after a sub-three items while looking for one of a set of another three. It's a solid but timeworn action RPG cliché, stretched to breaking point by *Darksiders* and leaving little room for story development in what is essentially a prolonged series of fetch quests.

Above: There are fewer *Gears Of War*-like third-person sections this time, with the angelic rifle and grenade launcher encountered during just one section of the game.

DARKSIDERS IS A ROUGH DIAMOND, LACKING THE SHARPER, POLISHED FACETS THAT MAKE A REAL GEM LIKE ZELDA SO IRRESISTIBLY GOOD

You still can't criticise *Darksiders II* for its length, though, because amazingly, within those 20 or so hours of gameplay – depending on how many trinket-grabbing side quests you decide to dedicate yourself to – the game manages to never become boring. The dungeons scale in difficulty with clockwork precision; the RPG upgrade system ensures you're always looking forward to a new power or upgrade; and the combat, although predominantly a button-mashing affair, is so awash with colour and devastating force delivered through powerful, crunching sound design that it's difficult to grow tired of it. This is an incredibly liberal action RPG when it comes to sheer length, and while hardly as varied as any of Link's adventures, it's still got a few surprises up its sleeve to keep you guessing at what might happen next.

So, although it's not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, this Death in the family may be exactly what THQ needs to save it from its current woes. Whereas the first game dragged, *Darksiders II* offers loot, side quests, an engaging skill tree, and a world four times bigger than the first that constantly keep you engaged with the experience. What's more, its various inspirations and genres feel more solidly packed together, robust and stable like a diamond formed under the pressure of the earth. It's a rough diamond, certainly, lacking the sharper, polished facets that make a real gem like *Zelda* so irresistibly good, but there's a dull gleam there nevertheless.

With a little more polish, *Darksiders* could be something special. Perhaps, come the next wave of consoles, Vigil can take that extra power and cut the series into something eminently more impressive. Strife, Fury, you're up to bat.

FAQs

Q. IS WAR IN IT?
He makes an appearance. The stories don't cross over as much as you might think, though. Death's narrative feels like it's largely occurring in the background.

Q. IS THE EQUIPMENT THE SAME?
Some items are just aesthetic variations – the Abyssal Chain is now the Deathgrip. Some, like the Crossblade, don't appear, and some are entirely new.

Q. ARE THERE GUNS?
You're not using Mercy, but Strife's pistol, Redemption. It's not hugely useful. You use two angelic weapons in third-person *Gears*-esque sequences too.

VERDICT 7/10
A SOLID BUT SOMEWHAT PREDICTABLE SEQUEL

SIX GOLDEN COINS, ADJUSTED FOR INFLATION

New Super Mario Bros 2

There's something a little disturbing about Nintendo's latest job for Mario. Previously, he's been asked to selflessly go after missing princesses and family members, been tasked with generously saving entire galaxies, and endlessly told to go throw giant turtle bastards around as punishment for misbehaving. All of that takes a back seat to magpie fever here, though, with the new slant being that if it's shiny, you want it. Bling is everything and everything is bling – collecting coins is nothing new in *Mario* games, of course, but within the first few levels of *New Super Mario Bros 2* alone, you'll have seen, if not pilfered, more than existed in entire previous games and enough to make Scrooge McDuck's vault look like a beggar's back pocket.

The game makes no secret of its oddly greedy goal, either. Total coin milestones are greeted with congratulatory messages that tally up through SpotPass for simultaneous global unlocks, and it'd almost be impossible to take a screenshot of the game that didn't have a coin in it. They litter levels as they always have but, on top of that, new power-ups and gimmicks flood the screen with currency as well, making it difficult to die enough to burn through all the 1-ups you'll earn through collecting them by the hundred. Honestly, if only real life worked in the same way, we'd almost have enough for three extra lives by now.

But as much as it might sound like you'll be playing Mario's get-rich-quick scheme, it'd be unfair to dwell on this hook for too long when the platforming itself is as robust as ever. Although some levels are clearly designed to be flooded with coins, others could just as easily be classic 8-bit *Mario* stages. In both structure and design, *NSMB2* owes much to *Super Mario Bros 3* – the world map is laid out similarly, plus the Raccoon Suit's speed gauge returns, meaning only the cautious and the wise will find the right opportunities to get airborne. The map screen also helps highlight where hidden exits might be, though finding them isn't always necessarily quite as simple. Coming into a stage after either a visit to a Toad House or with the gifts given by another level is often helpful, especially when the best power-ups aren't always available – at least, not easily – on the stages in question.

To be fair, though, that's about the only difficult thing about *New Super Mario Bros 2*. Getting from A to B is pretty much always a cakewalk, with the only challenge offered being the three Star Coins tucked away in each level, and even most of those aren't exactly difficult to grab. It's here that the 'coins everywhere' approach actually starts to work as a gameplay mechanic, fountains of cash and surprising coin appearances often enough to tap into a player's greed and make them put themselves in unnecessary danger in the name of a few extra pennies. It's almost ingenious in that respect, but with few payoffs for amassing hoards of coins, it's not too tough to break away from the mindset that every single round shiny thing is important, and by the end of the game you'll most likely be leaving a small fortune behind. And with your extra lives numbering in the hundreds, it simply won't matter.

Well, until you start playing Coin Rush, anyway. On paper, Coin Rush should be the best mode to grace a *Mario* game in years. It's a three-level survival challenge where the goal is to bring home as much gold as possible on a strict time limit and one life, but even with StreetPass integration, it's

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

COIN CRAZY: A focus on getting rich isn't intrinsically a bad thing, but with no actual payoff for hitting coin milestones, the system feels half-baked. There needs to be some kind of reward structure.



Right: Jumping through certain rings will turn all enemies gold and make them worth killing. Kicked shells will leave trails of money, while projectiles become coins for a time.

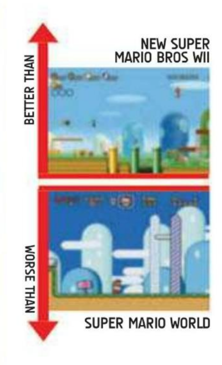
Right: There are nods to just about every major *Mario* game in there, which should keep the hardcore happy.



Above: Gold Mario lobs fireballs that explode into money. See? We weren't kidding when we said it was all about the bling...

YOU'LL SEE THE CREDITS AND THE ACCOMPANYING COIN-BASED FIREWORKS DISPLAY IN A MATTER OF HOURS





FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
The main six worlds can be conquered in several hours. The remaining three might take a little longer, if you can even be bothered.

Q. NEW POWER-UPS?
Indeed. Seeing Mario with a gold block for a head and spitting coins all over the level is amusing, if nothing else.

Q. HOW ARE THE BOSSES?
Uniformly awful. Every world has the same pushover mid-boss, while the Koopalings all follow much the same pattern.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

While the original DS game offered little in terms of multiplayer beyond a few daft mini-games, *NSMB2* instead takes a leaf out of the Wii version's book and offers full co-operative play. It's stripped back from four players to just two – which is a change for the better, as things could get pretty messy before – and while it doesn't necessarily add much to the game, the ever-present gaming truth that everything is more fun in co-op is just as accurate here as anywhere else. Too bad both players need a copy of the game to play – considering its brevity, it's unlikely that many people will make a point of keeping their copy on them.

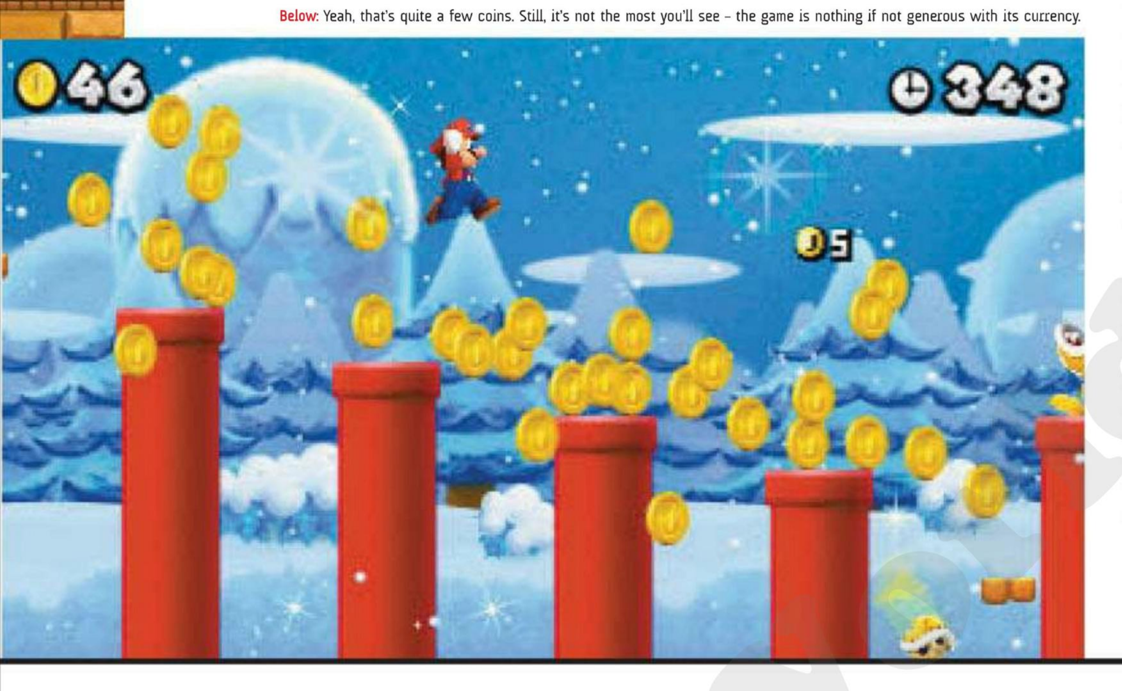
impossible to hold a fair competition on a set of randomly chosen levels. It's oddly compelling all the same, though there's little to it as a measure of actual skill – get the right set of levels and head in with the appropriate power-ups and you'll easily hit three times the score of someone who goes in blind. StreetPass has mad potential, though Nintendo has a lot to learn from the leaderboard-friendly champions of Xbox Live and PSN if this kind of feature is to truly make the most of the 3DS's remote connectivity.

And it's these kind of extras that the game really needs, since without them, it's *Mario* by numbers. That is to say it's a really well-made platform game but not one that has any lasting appeal beyond the weekend you buy it, since you'll see the credits and the accompanying coin-based fireworks display in a matter of hours. Yeah, there are several extra stages and worlds to unlock, though these add little in terms of 'I must carry this game with me forever' longevity – it's a few extra hours at best. Well, with the exception of the final world, which demands an arbitrarily huge number of Star Coins on the door for access to its challenging post-game levels.

There can be little disputing the quality on show here, although the underlying gimmick and universal approach mean that *New Super Mario Bros 2* can offer neither the mystery and experimentation of earlier games nor the challenge that new pretenders to the platforming crown lay so very, very thick. It's an entertaining afternoon of gaming but little more, despite its occasional lofty highs and some inspired design. And for many, that won't be enough, especially given the fact that we're dealing with gaming royalty here. But then perhaps gaming simply doesn't need a monarch any more.

VERDICT 7/10
'NEW' MIGHT BE STRETCHING IT A LITTLE

Below: Yeah, that's quite a few coins. Still, it's not the most you'll see – the game is nothing if not generous with its currency.



PUTTING SOME HEAT ON THE COMPETITION: GHOST RECON GOES FREE-TO-PLAY

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Online

Hindsight is a bittersweet thing in war when you can respawn an unlimited number of times after death. We've just been given several short, poignant lessons in the best places to defend the Shearwater 51 oil rig map when under attack, yet we've still got a lot to learn. To paraphrase another upcoming Ubisoft title, the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again and expect different results, which makes us pretty mental. But then, having been humiliated by a marksman on the defending team and this being free-to-play, we're not losing anything by stubbornly throwing our specialist down that corridor of doom, time and time again. Hopefully his repeated death will buy some time for the rest of the team to capture the next point.

Ghost Recon Online is a lightweight, third-person multiplayer cover shooter that would qualify as the online portion of an expansive single-player game, or a full-price XBLA title, which is the price we would normally expect to pay for a fairly hardcore game of this type. Only it's completely free to download and play, which we suspect will make *GRO* a real draw for a PC gaming community that, in recent years, has had its online toys snatched away from it and either given to consoles or monetised by increasingly corporate publishers.

Free-to-play doesn't mean that everything is free in *GRO*, naturally; there are the microtransactions we've come to know, and they're not so 'micro' in this case. Ghost Coins can be bought in bundles for around a fiver upwards, rather like buying Microsoft Points for your Xbox Live account, enabling you to furnish a soldier with extra kit and bonuses. These can be also be bought with Requisition Points, which can be earned by simply playing and completing games. Like any MMO, Ghost Coins simply give those with the finances but not the time a chance to buy their progression with real money. "No fair!" you cry? Well, to those with jobs, responsibilities and lives, having all the time in the world to practise a map and earn oodles of RPs while you're on your summer holidays isn't fair either. Perhaps you should relish the more level playing field this system potentially offers.

Besides, it's not as if a bank balance loaded with GCs has made our account imbalanced, as there's still a learning curve to get through, even if it is an extremely rapid one. *GRO* is pretty simple in terms of its pure shooting mechanics and online gaming functions. A team of ghosts is pitched against a team of *Splinter Cell Conviction*'s Megiddo in what currently consists of two different online modes: Conquest, which is a tug-of-war for territory against the clock, the object of the defending team being to prevent the attackers from taking too many control points before the timer expires; and Onslaught, in which the attackers must advance their position to take objectives A, B and C.

BETTER THAN — APB RELOADED

WORSE THAN — TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON FUTURE SOLDIER

Classes are equally simple: the specialist deals in shotgun and light machine gun support, the dreaded recon guy pops skulls with a sniper rifle from range, and the assault soldier, with standard-issue automatic rifles, takes up the mid-range. Each has abilities associated with it, so the recon class has active camouflage and Oracle, which is a kind of radar that works a bit like the Farsight gun in *Perfect Dark* – useful when acting alone, but with efficient team communication, lets the squad keep tabs on enemy movements. Assault has a TS3B shield that gives added protection and allows the soldier to knock his opponent down, plus one of our favourite abilities in *GRO*, the HEAT device, which injures and renders enemies within a certain area temporarily incapable of combat in a rippling blue wave of energy. Specialists have the equivalent of the HEAT that cripples technologies rather than people in the Aegis, a kind of god mode that bends bullets away from your body while active. Running and gunning is rarely advisable in *GRO*, but with Aegis activated, it's the best way to play.

All of these can be upgraded as your soldiers level up, gaining experience with each kill and each map completed, regardless of whether your performance was exemplary or not. That's the great thing about *GRO*: as long as you're playing, you're progressing. Experience and Requisition Points will come quicker to good performers, of course, but with daily missions and achievements to unlock, even horrible players can muster a few levels in a couple of hours while scraping together enough RPs to upgrade a soldier and focus on getting the hang of at least one of the classes.

This is a cinch to get into, especially for those who like to nip into shooters as a break from MMOs – you'll be perfectly at home with both the micropayment system and cover shooter mechanics. *GRO* is probably the kind of no-frills, zero-dedication shooter accessible to everyone that will appeal, as its free-to-play structure and competitive quality means there will always be a match for you to dip into, no matter what the time of day is.

If we have to pick at something, it's the fact that you're locked into your class once you start a game, which means that a team might well have doomed themselves before they've even started the game, depending on the map and the opposition. It's also pretty basic as far as today's online shooters are concerned, but as you have to tell yourself, this is free. And even in the face of other free-to-play competition, that's pretty good value for money.



VERDICT 7/10
GUILT-FREE TO PLAY

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

MICROPAYMENT SHOOTER: Free-to-play online shooters featuring microtransactions have been around for several years, but *GRO* moves in on much more traditional online shooter territory.

DETAILS



FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Wii U
ORIGIN: Singapore
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Singapore
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2-16
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 2.6GHz dual-core, 3GB RAM, 256MB Radeon X1000/GeForce 8800 graphics
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

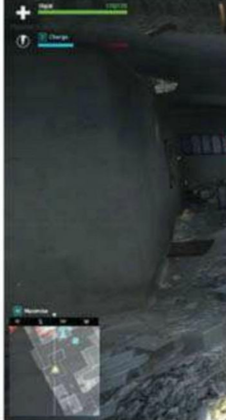
FAQs

Q. IS REAL MONEY REQUIRED?
Absolutely not. Skill and dedication can achieve as much, if not more than, a ready source of cash.

Q. WHAT'S THE DOWNLOAD SIZE?
A 3.4MB launcher is followed by around 2GB of game content.

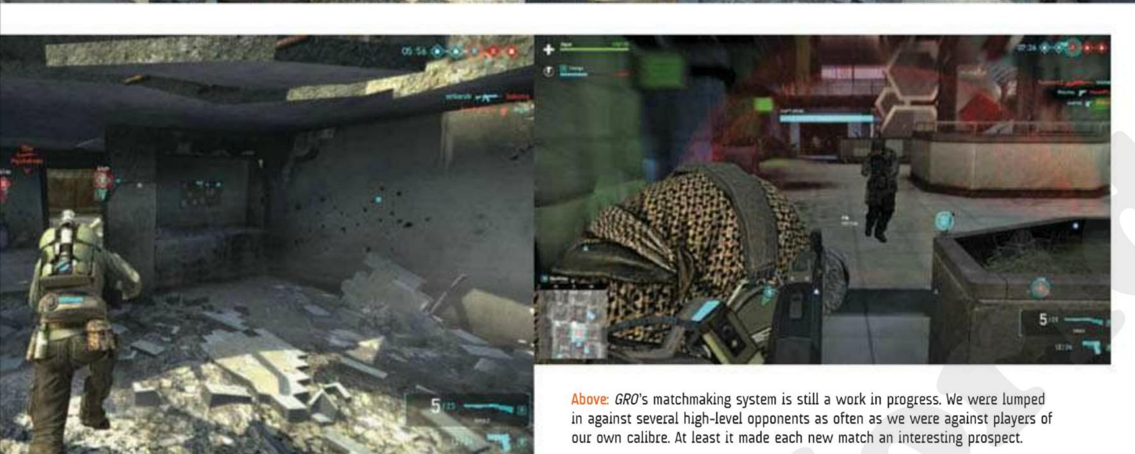
Q. WHAT ENGINE IS USED?
A modified version of the YETI engine, which is the same one used for *GRAW* and *Future Soldier*.





HAVING ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD TO PRACTISE A MAP AND EARN OODLES OF RPS WHILE YOU'RE ON YOUR SUMMER HOLIDAYS ISN'T FAIR EITHER

Left: The cover system works in typical *Ghost Recon* fashion, with the space bar popping you easily in and out of boxes and walls.



Above: *GRO*'s matchmaking system is still a work in progress. We were lumped in against several high-level opponents as often as we were against players of our own calibre. At least it made each new match an interesting prospect.

REAP WHAT YOU SOW

Equipment, training and experience make a soldier, real or otherwise. While your man is hardly a wad of soft putty when you start *Ghost Recon Online*, give your soldier a dozen hours of playtime and even if you struggle to make a single kill every game you play, he'll begin to resemble something carved out of hardwood. Weapons and armour unlocks come with every few levels earned: a piece of body armour or a better shotgun can be bought that, in turn, can be further improved with modifications that increase health, damage and other attributes. The advantage this brings a player is noticeable enough to make putting the graft in and earning these tangible rewards worthwhile.

GOTTA SNATCH 'EM ALL!

Outernauts

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the advances of Insomniac Games will leave Nintendo rosy-cheeked. *Outernauts* may be coated in a space-age theme, but beneath the lavish costumes and intergalactic travel, sheer love for *Pokémon* resides.

This isn't criticism. The decision to implement a copycat battle system, which forces you to hunt down and capture the universe's deadliest creatures, provides the game with a strong base to build on. After choosing your original beast, a decent selection of tutorials sums up the basics, before whisking you off to a foreign planet. It doesn't quite have the same effect as meeting Professor Oak for the first time, but things move on so quickly that you won't have time to care.

Plenty of missions become available early on, as the developer aims to satisfy all types of players. After establishing your homeland, you're advised to build a fuel pump and laboratory. These provide vital resources, such as energy for exploration, and petrol to power your spaceship. Both are essential for progress to take place. Building is quick and easy, but you'll have to save plenty of in-game coins to unlock other helpful structures. Training dojos and armouries are useful additions, but if you're not willing to part with real cash, they'll take a little time to unlock.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Facebook
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: Insomniac Games
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: Turn-based battles may be strategic, but they never last longer than a few minutes.



Thankfully, this model doesn't interrupt play too much. A variety of objectives are almost always available, meaning there's usually a task to be getting on with. The game's biggest hindrance comes in the form of the energy system, which depletes every time you dig, battle or create items. This quickly runs down, and if you haven't got money on your side, the only remedy is time. Waiting an hour or so will let you continue, but it can be frustrating if you're in the middle of looting a planet and your character suddenly falls asleep.

It's annoying because each world is interesting to explore. A plethora of creepy, cute and ridiculous characters await your attention, providing a sense of unknown that continues to entice. When you're loaded with gravity balls (the game's equivalent of a Pokéball), it's thrilling to enter alien territory on the lookout for new additions to your team.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

INTERNAUGHTS?: Unfortunately, multiplayer in *Outernauts* doesn't take place in real-time. You can only battle friends through a series of asynchronous turns, like many apps.

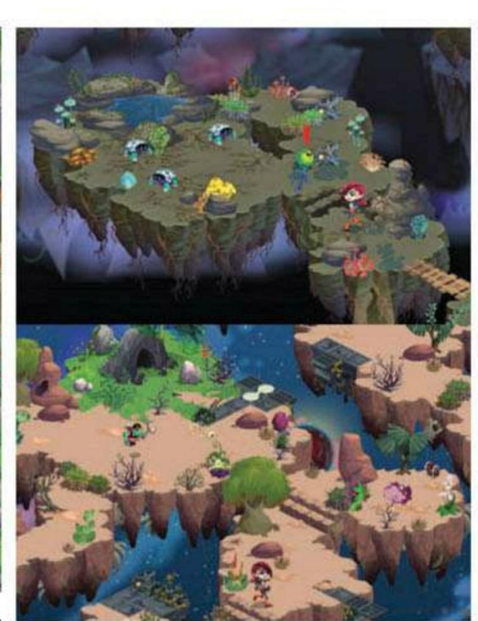
Turn-based battles can take place with up to three critters each side, so it's a fine idea to bolster your ranks early. Each encounter runs smoothly and, for the most part, conflict is balanced. If you're looking to challenge one of the game's main characters, a small amount of time will need to be spent grinding. Usually, a couple of battles is enough to guarantee a fair fight, but combined with the energy system, this can be problematic if you don't want to wait.

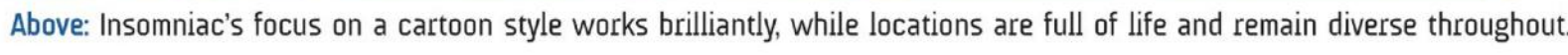
Despite this, *Outernauts* flaunts a surprising amount of charm. The cartoon style complements a title that evokes a sense of nostalgia without ever feeling outdated. Insomniac has produced a well-rounded game that might jog a few treasured memories and have you hunting down that old Charizard shiny.



VERDICT 7/10
A STEP UP ON MOST FACEBOOK GAMES







Above: Insomniac's focus on a cartoon style works brilliantly, while locations are full of life and remain diverse throughout.


The abstract art style is accompanied by an equally alluring soundtrack. This proves the perfect combination to totally lose yourself in the game, with many sessions leaving you in a state of near-hypnosis as the experience washes over you.

NOT MUCH AT THE END, BUT DEFINITELY LIGHTS IN THE TUNNEL

Dyad



When a man puts his life savings and nearly four years of his time into a game, you might expect it to be a safe bet. Mainstream. Populist. You likely wouldn't expect it to be an abstract score attack racer-cum-shooter of the ilk of *Rez* or *Child Of Eden*. But that's just what the one-man team of Shawn McGrath has done with *Dyad*.

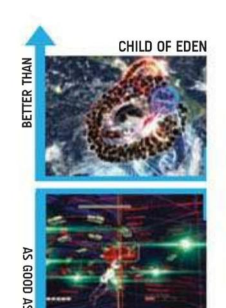
It's not as simple as its closest comparable examples, though. Players are required to hook their way from start to finish on a track, using coloured hook points to drag themselves along. Complexity is ladled on slowly but generously throughout – hooking two of the same colour in a row for a boost, 'lancing' to get an even bigger boost, travelling perilously close to the points, which will incur a time penalty if hit, to charge said lance ability – making for a game that's totally different on the last level to the one you were initially playing at stage one. But it's handled cleverly, meaning these layers are never overwhelming and, as long as you're paying attention, it cannot become too much to handle.

It's surprising in a game that might initially appear to have such limited scope that there's a lot to entice different players. This slightly broader appeal is accomplished simply by mixing up goals on levels – in the main, it's a case of lurching towards the finish line with as many paired anchors as possible, or simply in the quickest time. But then there are the levels demanding you lance a defined number of targets, or a collection of segments that require you to keep your average checkpoint time below a certain count in order to be awarded the highest ranking. It doesn't mix things up to the point where it's unrecognisable, but it keeps *Dyad* feeling fresh for far longer than we ever expected it to.

And that's the general feeling we get from McGrath's all-or-nothing gambit: it's better than we expected it to be. It's fairly short – at least if you have no particular desire to try to work your way up the worldwide leaderboards or earn the Trophies, which are handled through separate levels – and it's certainly not of a style that will appeal to everyone. But they are moot points, all things considered. *Dyad* is a brilliant game; slathered in the passion of its one-man development team and laced with the skill and subtlety of something that has been worked on and worked on and worked on for a number of years. It's fun, too. Even if the man's mortgage payments weren't riding on it, we'd recommend you pick it up, but as that probably is the case, we'll go with: buy it right now, please.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER:][Inc
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $14.99
RELEASE: TBC
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

NO MP: There's no multiplayer in *Dyad*, but there is the ever-present leaderboard system. What this means is those of a certain disposition trying repeatedly to beat friends' scores. Just what you want, really.

VERDICT 8/10
A SOUND INVESTMENT FOR BOTH DEVELOPER AND PLAYER

SO WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

Spelunky





Above: There are lots of shops throughout the game. Some sell useful items or power-ups. Some are more esoteric in nature. You can steal stuff if you like, but there are consequences...

With every trendy indie fan on the planet losing their minds over *Spelunky*, it would be easy to believe that it's the most earth-shatteringly inventive game ever made and that it redefines the way we think about game design. Well, it isn't and it doesn't. But it is still a great game.

First released as a freeware PC title in 2008 and now lovingly remade on the Xbox with shiny new graphics, better music and added extras like new characters and a multiplayer mode, *Spelunky* is a very clever blend of retro platformer and Roguelike. Every level is randomly generated. There are no extra lives. And the aim is, simply, to get to the end without dying.

It's the Roguelike element that makes *Spelunky* more than just another indie platformer. There are tons of elements to any stage – enemies, of course, plus traps, treasure, rocks you can pick up and throw, damsels to rescue, and shops to buy weird power-ups from. Each is fun in isolation but even better when they come together.

The fun of *Spelunky* is its playful experimentation, the way you can interact with the world just to see what happens, so we wouldn't want to spoil the experience by revealing those surprises. Suffice to say that you can play *Spelunky* over and over and over again without seeing everything that's possible, and almost every playthrough will elicit a grin as familiar elements work together to do something unexpected.

It's this that makes the single-life mechanic so vital. Without it, most players would breeze through *Spelunky* and only see a fraction of its possibilities. But constantly starting from scratch, ever aware of the ease with which you could die, forces you to play with trepidation, taking your time and learning all the ways to exploit the world around you.

Of course, this is a fundamental trait of the Roguelike genre, but it's given a new twist in *Spelunky* by taking what is usually a set of mechanics reserved for the turn-based RPG and transplanting them into a real-time platformer. This brings a whole new level of excitement to the game – just try throwing a bomb into a crowded room, for example, then sit back and see what chaos ensues. But it can also make the game more frustrating. The turn-based nature of traditional Roguelikes encourages a thoughtful pace of play, but in *Spelunky* you often have to rush, which creates panic and leads to fatal mistakes.

We've sworn at the screen more times while playing *Spelunky* than practically any other game, so we wouldn't recommend this to anyone with anger-management issues or a heart condition. But, by the same token, it's also afflicted us with chronic one-more-go syndrome. So we would recommend it to anyone who loves videogames, which is surely all of you...

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Mossmouth
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

SHIREN THE WANDERER





DARK SOULS

WORSE THAN

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SMOOTHED OVER: The new visuals, multiplayer and bonuses make this a great update that justifies the price tag. But we would have liked a 'classic' mode, featuring the original retro-style graphics and sound.



SOME GOOD FINALLY CAME OF SPELUNKER

Below: The number of items you can carry and wear is limited, so you may have to drop something you need at some point in the game. It's also possible to throw items at enemies, though you risk losing them.







Gun combat is a taut affair as ammunition is rare and reloading individual shells consumes precious seconds. You'll often find that the best method is to avoid firefights altogether.



WE'VE GOT LOVE FOR YOU IF YOU WERE DEAD IN THE EIGHTIES

Deadlight

Bathing in a suffocating gloom of a dour alternative vision of 1986, *Deadlight* isn't a game that pulls its punches in its presentation of a retro Seattle ravaged by shuffling undead, referred to as 'shadows' by the world's survivors. It's a formidable, eerie vista, but this tempestuous wilderness also stands as *Deadlight*'s most arresting feature.

Tequila Works' indie survival trial utilises a 2D perspective that frames the action in such a way that the artistry shines through. The foreground quietly but powerfully balances lighting and shadow effects, while the background chronicles a larger pandemic than the immediate suggests – occasionally a vehicle will screech through the scenery engulfed in flames to interpose the drama, but it's the billowing smoke on the horizon that proves the most disquieting.

Presentation is key here. Comic-book-style vignettes – pencilled with the same harsh strokes as the *Walking Dead* comics and succinctly emulating Kirkman's tone in each of the brief cinematics – punctuate the close of each level. It's one of several key influences that support *Deadlight*'s brisk campaign, with gameplay design a well-implemented collection of cribbed ideas.

See, *Deadlight* isn't a zombie game in a traditional sense. Sure, it has elements of survival horror tropes sprinkled economically throughout. But it alleviates these tension-fuelled scenarios with exhilarating chase sequences and, for one overly protracted chapter, a *Limbo*-style try-and-die puzzle setup.

The mechanics themselves don't fare as well as the overall vision. The platforming itself feels, much like *Deadlight*'s protagonist, stuck in the Eighties. Imagine *Flashback* or *Prince Of Persia*'s precise platforming, coupled with all the niggling frustrations that come alongside it. It never strikes a fatal blow to progress or pacing, but as the game struggles to decide whether you want to drop from or climb the platform you're currently dangling from, it represents a frequent irritation.

As the game leaps quite literally towards its inevitable conclusion, *Deadlight* marries platforming, puzzles and action sequences into a tension-driven finale. However, while each of these elements functions adeptly independently, these brief amalgamated sections feel awkward and, very occasionally, bitingly cheap.

It's not enough to detract from *Deadlight*'s masterful handle on tension. Each step in the game has an opposing sense of urgency, compounded by protagonist Randall Wayne's bruised psyche and unreliable narration. Wayne's penitence and struggle for salvation is a compelling focal point, but one that's too overwrought and incoherent to connect with the player. But for the most part, Wayne is a shining beacon of optimism to counterpoint the cheerless spectacle.

Tequila Works' debut's confident craftsmanship and considered design more than compensates for its shortfalls with the narrative's impact and the intermittently niggling handling. It's by no means a smooth ride, but this dank and desolate landscape is worth braving.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Tequila Works
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PICK UP AND PLAY: Implementing the various objects spread across *Deadlight*'s post-apocalyptic world in some way that interacts with puzzles – or at least an option to browse them in a menu.

VERDICT 7/10

A BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARE WITH A FEW NIGGLING ISSUES

Below: Satoshi Urushihara's illustrations may verge on the smutty, but they add a lot of character to the game.





THE BEST JAPANESE TACTICAL RPG YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF TURNS UP FOR THE PSP'S EULOGY

Growlanser: Wayfarer Of Time

Although the six-strong *Growlanser* series officially made its debut in 1999 on the PlayStation, it's actually the spiritual successor to *Langrisser*, a tactical RPG franchise that stretches right back to the 16-bit era. Despite this illustrious lineage, it's likely that most Western players have never even heard of CareerSoft's body of work, which makes this PSP remake of the fourth game quite a hard sell, especially when you consider the deluge of RPGs we've seen on Sony's ageing handheld of late.

Growlanser: Wayfarer Of Time's chances aren't improved by its inconsistent presentation, either; compared to *Gungnir* – another recent PSP RPG – the game looks decidedly poor. The CGI-rendered characters and flat, uninspiring environments betray *Wayfarer Of Time*'s status as an update of a PS2 release from 2003. However, the sumptuous anime introduction sequence and character artwork from Satoshi Urushihara – famed in Japan for his pornographic depictions of wide-eyed, large-chested females – manage to pull you in, and that's when the unexpectedly deep gameplay sinks its teeth into you and steadfastly refuses to relinquish its grip.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSP
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Atlus
DEVELOPER: CareerSoft
PRICE: $29.99
RELEASE: Out now (US)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Wayfarer Of Time boasts a surprisingly innovative combat system that completely does away with the grid format so commonly seen in other examples of the genre. Instead, you assign your characters waypoints, which can be edited on the fly depending on the tide of the battle. Additional commands can be assigned at any point, making the game feel less turn-based and more akin to an RTS title.

While the combat element unquestionably entertains, other sections are less successful. At times, the art style of the game seems seriously mixed up; some characters are dressed in traditional fantasy armour, while others are bedecked in suits and ties. Also, the inclusion of fairy-like familiars gives *Wayfarer Of Time* a disagreeable dose of cuteness, which sits uncomfortably with the unrelenting tale of intercontinental conflict and deadly, avenging angels hell-bent on wiping out humanity. Possibly the most damning fault is the slow nature of the plotting; *Wayfarer Of Time* seems to take forever to really get rolling, and it's highly likely that many players will lose interest long before they start hitting the really significant moments in the storyline.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ESCAPING THE GRID: While the vast majority of tactical RPGs are bound by a grid system, *Growlanser* is unique in that you can command your troops to move virtually anywhere on the map using waypoints.

If you possess the willpower to overcome these issues then you'll find around 50 or so hours of thoroughly rewarding and entertaining RPG action, as well as a combat engine that not only rewards skilful players, but also seems to delight in attempting something new with the genre. Even if you've never heard of the name *Growlanser* before, this is worth a look despite its shortcomings; there are certainly worse ways to bid Sony's alarmingly resilient handheld goodbye.



VERDICT 7/10



A ROUGH YET ENDEARING JRPG WITH UNIQUE COMBAT

HOW SCI-FI ARE YOU?

Use the SciFiNow flowchart to find out…

START

HAVE YOU SEEN STAR WARS?
- STUPID QUESTION → DID HAN SHOOT FIRST?
- NO → END

DID HAN SHOOT FIRST?
- YES. YES. YES → DO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE?
- NAH. IT WAS GREEDO → IS MEMORABILIA FOR DESKS OR KIDS?

DO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE?
- YES I DO → WOULD YOU PASS A VOIGHT-KAMPFF TEST?
- BELIEVE IN WHAT? → DO THESE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU: 4,8,15,16, 23,42

WOULD YOU PASS A VOIGHT-KAMPFF TEST?
- NATURALLY → WHAT DOES OCP STAND FOR?
- A WHAT-KAMPFF? → DO YOU KNOW WHAT EXACTLY THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES IS?

IS MEMORABILIA FOR DESKS OR KIDS?
- KIDS → WOULD YOU PREFER AN IPAD OR ZIGGY?
- DESKS → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?

WOULD YOU PREFER AN IPAD OR ZIGGY?
- IPAD → NOWHERE NEAR GEEKY ENOUGH. BUT THERE IS HOPE
- ZIGGY → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?

DO THESE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU: 4,8,15,16, 23,42
- LOTTERY PREDICTION? → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?
- OF COURSE → UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT EXACTLY THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES IS?
- THEY SMELL A BIT? → HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
- SURE → DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?

WHAT DOES OCP STAND FOR?
- HAVEN'T A CLUE → DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?
- OMNI CONSUMER PRODUCTS → HOW DO YOU SPELL 'RECALL'?

WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?
- FLUX CAPACITOR → UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?
- NOTHING → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT

UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?
- ADAMANTIUM → WHO IS HAL JORDAN?
- UNOBTAINIUM → WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?

DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?
- NEVER → HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
- YEP → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?

HOW DO YOU SPELL 'RECALL'?
- LIKE THAT → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
- NOT LIKE THAT → WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?

WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?
- VIMTO → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT
- VISITORS. OR VENDETTA. WHICHEVER → THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER

WHO IS HAL JORDAN?
- NO IDEA → WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?
- EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT… → FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?

HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
- WITH PEOPLE → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
- PAINT IT? → FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?

WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
- DUNNO → DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
- LOST IN TIME → WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?

FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?
- ARE YOU MENTAL? → WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
- ISN'T THAT A VAMPIRE? → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT

WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
- A PARTY? → THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER
- JUDGMENT DAY → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
- SUNDAY TIMES SUPPLEMENT? → WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
- YES → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?

WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?
- UPPER? → DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
- M → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?

CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?
- SURE CAN'T → IMPRESSIVE. YOUR SCI-FI KNOWLEDGE IS PRETTY AMAZING
- SURE CAN → WE BOW DOWN TO YOU, MASTER OF ALL GEEKDOM

NOWHERE NEAR GEEKY ENOUGH. BUT THERE IS HOPE

SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT

THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER

IMPRESSIVE. YOUR SCI-FI KNOWLEDGE IS PRETTY AMAZING

WE BOW DOWN TO YOU, MASTER OF ALL GEEKDOM

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THE END

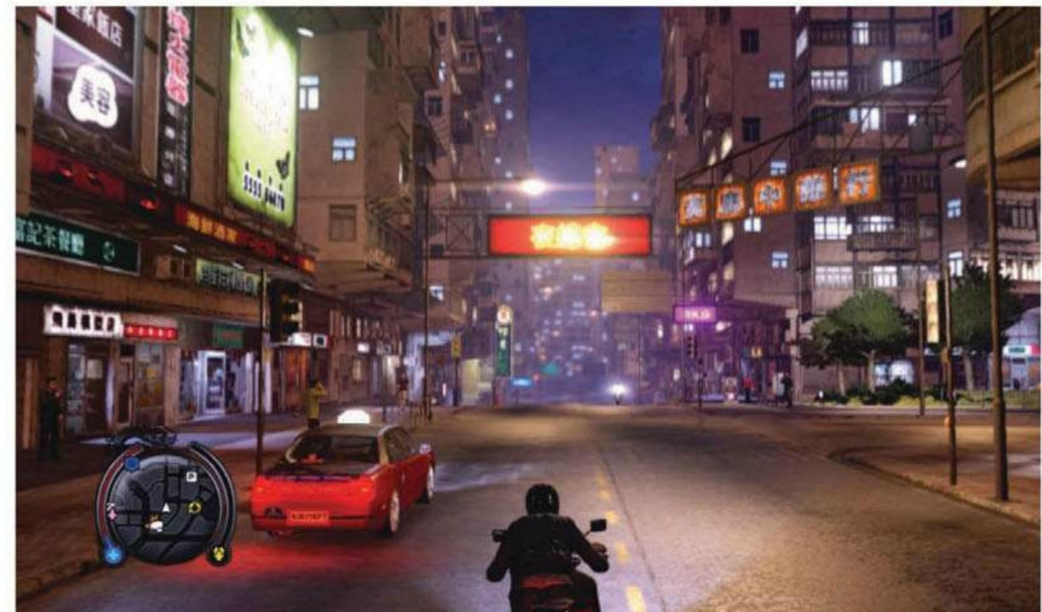
MORE SCI-FI THAN YOU THOUGHT?

JOIN OTHER LIKE-MINDED INDIVIDUALS EVERY MONTH AND READ SCIFINOW. **BECAUSE SCI-FI'S FOR EVERYONE**

SQUARE ENIX GAVE THE TEAM AT UNITED FRONT GAMES A CHANCE WHEN ACTIVISION WOULDN'T, AND IT PAID OFF

FACE/ON

Unlike *GTA IV*, *Sleeping Dogs* has a sizeable skill/upgrade mechanic that defines everything about your character, from how he fights to the respect he gets on the street. Finishing cases and gangland jobs gives you cred with each organisation, but add a touch of class to proceedings and you'll rank up more quickly. So drive carefully as a cop – damaging people and property can knock your score – and make sure you smash everyone you fight into environmental death traps as a criminal. Ranking up gives you a point to spend on a new skill, with each organisation and facet of Wei Shen's abilities having two trees to head down. It's not exactly *Skyrim*, but it does mean your character keeps growing over the experience.







GOOD JOB THEY DIDN'T PUT THIS ONE DOWN

Sleeping Dogs

DETAILS

FORMAT: 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: United Front Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

In brutally honest terms, very few people were upset – bar the developers, their mothers, and the six people left on the planet who loved *True Crime* – when *True Crime: Hong Kong* was canned in 2011. It was just another open-world game biting the dust, joining others such as the mighty *Eight Days* on the scrap heap. It was a harsh move on Activision's part, granted, after it finally noticed whatever it was that caused the title to become unnecessary, and cancelled what was purportedly a near-finished game, but no one wept or anything. It was just business.

Harsh, yes, and now maybe a little embarrassing, as the resurrected *True Crime* has turned out to be a fine game, with a style all its own and, in a lot of instances, a truly spectacular sense of place. We'll probably never know just how much it changed between being put into what Tinseltown might dub 'turnaround', but the hard fact is that Square Enix gave the team at United Front Games a chance when Activision wouldn't, and it paid off.

For the most part, the rechristened *Sleeping Dogs* is a game developed by people who seem to know what they're doing, which is rarer than you'd think. Unlike other open-worlders that mistakenly believe that bigger is better, United Front has instead gone for a mid-sized map that is denser than its competitors. It makes perfect sense considering that Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated places in the world and the majority of big open-world games are emptier than Pripyat, and just as ugly.

As rising star in the triads and undercover police officer Wei Shen, you'll have the run of the whole place, split into four main districts that, typically, range from slums to opulence and everything in between. United Front's world-building skill is impressive: on seemingly every corner there's something to do, somebody to interact with and something to buy. As in reality, Hong Kong is a beautiful, crowded flurry of sensory overload, and United Front has captured it well. From stalking neon-

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

I FOUGHT FOR THE LAW: After years of playing as gangsters, gangstas, and straight out sociopaths, it's interesting to play as someone on the other side of the law. Well, apparently, at least.

Below: Hand-to-hand fighting is Wei Shen's primary combat method, and it should come as no surprise that he's pretty good at it. Sustain your attacks on a group for long enough and you'll hulk up, causing fear in the rest of your attackers.



Left: Gunplay is solid if not spectacular, but it does have its moments. Holding LT when vaulting over cover will send Wei Shen into slow-mo for a few seconds, enabling players to pick their shots. A small touch, but satisfying nonetheless.

tinted back alleys to cruising around mountainous, yacht-heavy harbours in full prep regalia, there's a variety here that isn't found elsewhere. Not in terms of what's there, but how it's presented, the familiar yet alien Asian culture exploited to full effect.

It would be a shame to waste such a beautiful backdrop, and United Front hasn't, crafting an enjoyable crime thriller that complements the city in which it's set, giving players a look at it from every angle from brutal to refined. Like in *GTA*, you'll start at the bottom of the pile and slowly work your way up to a position of power and influence among the other players in organised crime. The difference here is that you're also a cop, and both the story and mechanics of the game are focused around the tension and opportunity this balancing act brings to proceedings. Wei Shen is a likeable, honest guy, doubly so when he's surrounded by an ocean of thieves, murderers, pimps and whores. Despite this apparent disparity, the game does a great job of making players question their loyalties: yes, you're an officer of the law, but after spending so much time in the company of criminals, it's hard not to feel like one of them, especially since you're also committing many of the illegal acts.

Playing both sides ensures that the narrative is constantly engaging, while also providing a decent enough motivation for a supposedly good guy to keep on killing. It's something that *GTA IV*, with kind-hearted – and, by the last act of the game, millionaire assassin – Niko Bellic, constantly moaning about money and murder, couldn't get right. It's a setup that then informs the core gameplay: by and large, the mission loops themselves aren't too dissimilar from the groundwork laid down by Rockstar, but the conflicting loyalties of the storyline keep them interesting. Police assignments usually take the course of multi-part cases of detective work, surveillance and arrests, whereas your triad activities are more likely to be quick and to the very violent point. Whenever interest in one starts to wane, there's always another investigation to get stuck into, underworld machinations to address, or some rival thugs to dispatch.

And dispatch them you will, in a style and manner very different to the firearms-focused *GTA*. Guns are rare in *Sleeping Dogs*; instead, you'll have to rely on your fists and feet to get the job done. Using a system that recalls but doesn't quite match the free-flowing grace and finesse of Rocksteady's *Arkham* games, the combat is great fun, although, towards the end, you may tire of it simply because you've seemingly fought everyone in China. Brutal leg breaks, punishing combos and environmental kills are commonplace, and the game metes out upgrades in just the right fashion to keep things interesting. And when the guns finally come out, there's also slow-motion shooting alongside *Pursuit Force*-style 'action hijacking' to play around with. Like the narrative and setting, other games may have similar mechanics, but *Sleeping Dogs*' interpretation is different enough to engage in a way that others often don't.

There are plenty of positives, then, and for that United Front can be proud. In the face of the game coming back from the dead, it seems a

FAQs

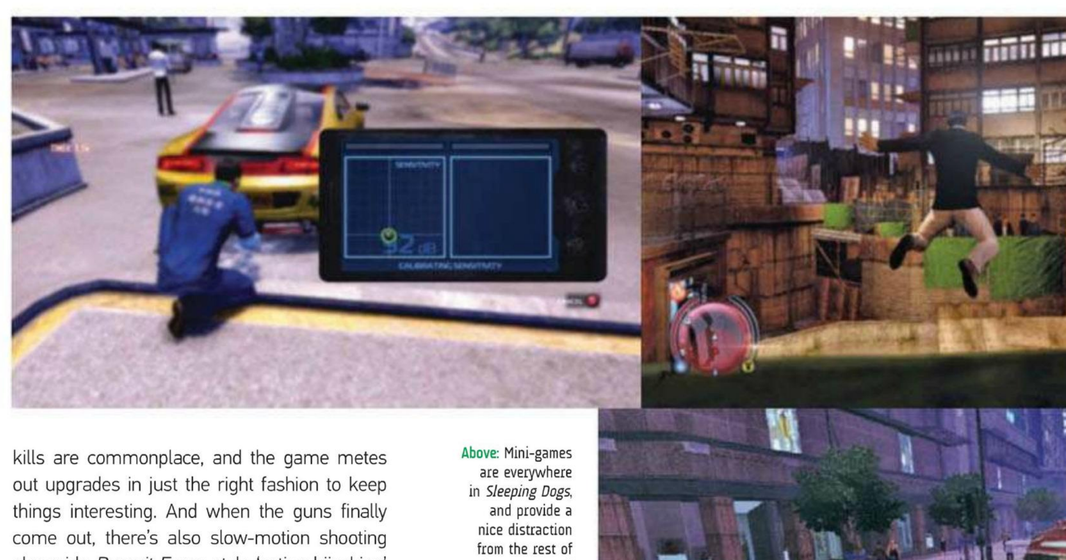
Q. THAT WORKED OUT WELL, THEN. PHEW, EH?
Yup, and we're glad it did.

Q. WHAT DO YOU THINK ACTIVISION WILL MAKE OF IT?
It probably doesn't care. It's still got that lovely *COD* thing.

Q. BIT SAD, THAT, ISN'T IT?
A little bit.



Right: There's a very cool, Mann-esque feel about *Sleeping Dogs* that sets it apart from other games of its ilk. It feels like you're treading a fine line through the underworld, and it's up to players which side they favour.



Above: Mini-games are everywhere in *Sleeping Dogs*, and provide a nice distraction from the rest of the game. You'll plant bugs on cars against the clock, triangulate positions of crooks on the run, pick locks and even sing karaoke.

WHENEVER INTEREST STARTS TO WANE, THERE'S ANOTHER INVESTIGATION, UNDERWORLD MACHINATIONS TO ADDRESS, OR RIVAL THUGS TO DISPATCH

Below: Shen can bolster his already formidable abilities by visiting the many shops that litter Hong Kong and purchasing a range of buffs. Fighting abilities, damage limiters and popularity/influence boosters are all on hand.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

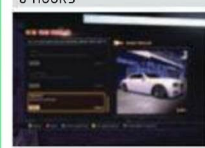
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



Turned loose, you're probably now soaking it all up. And chasing people down alleyways before breaking their skulls open. Welcome to Hong Kong. They do things differently here.

6 HOURS



Starting to gain traction in the underworld, you're one of the main faces on the street, and you've probably already bought an overpriced sports car so everyone knows it.

12 HOURS



It's all over, and in the process you've killed about 40,000 people while somehow remaining a cop. Nevertheless, you've had a lovely time, and you'll definitely be back for any potential sequel.

EASILY DISTRACTED

The cop/crim duality of *Sleeping Dogs'* narrative is interesting enough, but if you tire of it there's plenty to do in Hong Kong. Street racing and fighting in martial arts clubs will boost your 'Face', as will helping out your crew on the streets, which is vital to getting your hands on bigger and better equipment. There are also gambling dens in which to win/lose all of your money, and you can even go cockfighting if that's your speed. Add in shopping for clothes and toys; passive challenges such as kill streaks, safe driving and jump distances; and singing in karaoke bars and there's plenty for you to be getting on with. And if all that gets boring, you can just fight people in the street.



bit churlish to moan about the few faults that are there, but we're going to anyway. After the wonder that was *Saints Row: The Third*'s co-op missions, the inability to share this world with someone else is a shame. In fact, there's no multiplayer to speak of at all, with only global leaderboards and social hubs to interact with. Co-op in the story might not have worked, but we'd have loved to cause mayhem on the streets with a buddy. Maybe next time.

There are other, smaller issues; one of the most glaring is with the 'Face' mechanic that governs how players level their character. Having goals to work towards is fair enough, and making sure that you've got something to spend your money on is also a wise move. But not being able to wear certain clothes until you've got enough Face is absurd. In one baffling instance, the game gives you an outfit to wear for a special occasion, but you can't wear it after that time until you level up. Despite the fact that it's in your wardrobe. The same goes for cars: you've got to purchase your rides here, and once that's done they're forever stored at your behest. That said, we've never met a car dealer who wouldn't take our money because we weren't famous enough.

Speaking of cars, the in-car audio, too, is a bit of a letdown. There are the prerequisite radio stations, of course, but there aren't enough tracks to each one, meaning you'll be hearing the same tunes over and over again. This, in a game that sees you in a car a lot of the time, is maddening. We love *Echo Beach*, don't get us wrong, but on the 507th listen it begins to grate. And don't even get us started on how there are classic cuts in the karaoke clubs that seemingly aren't available elsewhere. We don't even know where to begin with that one.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ONLINE GANG WAR: At the risk of repeating ourselves, we'd love for a *Sleeping Dogs* sequel to have a multiplayer element. Let's hope it sells well enough for that to happen.

But these are small prices to pay for a game that, if Activision had its way, would have been a historical curio, a forgotten 'what if?', and nothing else. It might not have quite the same quality as *GTA*, nor the rabid anarchy of *Saints Row*, but it's a game that fundamentally feels different enough to what's gone before, thanks to the city, the narrative and the focus on kung fu rather than gun fu.

Until Rockstar decides to end its American obsession and explore the world with *GTA*, this is the closest we'll get to the quality of its environments in a foreign setting. Such a comparison is high enough praise on its own, but *Sleeping Dogs* is successful because it dares to be different, and actually thinks about how to make narrative, gameplay and setting play off each other. Which, for a game that no one expected much from when it was taken out back and shot, is quite something.

VERDICT 8/10

A WORTHY ALTERNATIVE TO THE USUAL SUSPECTS

SAMURAICHU, I CHOOSE YOU

Pokémon Conquest

When the idea of crossing Nintendo's *Pokémon* with Koei's feudal Japan strategy series, *Nobunaga's Ambition*, was first announced, we thought it had to be an April fool's joke. And even when it was confirmed, we assumed that *Pokémon + Nobunaga's Ambition*, as it was known in Japan, would remain exclusive to its country of origin. Yet here it is, in the slightly more palatable Western guise of *Pokémon Conquest*. It's still Pokémon and samurai battling for regional dominance in the 16th Century and, as it turns out, the marriage of IPs works incredibly well.

It's hard to believe that nobody had the idea of making a *Pokémon* strategy RPG before, actually. With hundreds of monsters in the series' history, each with their own array of powers and ability to evolve, the pocket monsters fit into this genre perfectly, satisfying that strategic urge to build teams of complementary units, or just your favourite monsters. And *Nobunaga's Ambition* in particular is an especially good fit. Where some SRPGs see a single force work its way through a set of linear battles, Koei's series sees players fighting over territories on a map of Japan. Each territory won becomes another fortification for the player to populate with another group of Pokémon. Every territory can house six warlords, and each of these can carry around up to six of their own Pokémon, brilliantly tapping into the 'gotta catch 'em all' mentality at the core of the series.



FORMAT: DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Tecmo Koei
PRICE: £22.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Just about every facet of *Pokémon* gameplay you would expect is here, from catching wild monsters out in the field, to training and evolving them, powering them up with TMs and developing new powers. Pokémon don't level up as such, but the bond between warlord and monster can increase with experience, strengthening the metaphor of samurai as ancient Pokémon trainers. Yet it's *Pokémon Conquest*'s accomplishment as a strategy RPG that most impresses.

No one expected *Pokémon Conquest* to be anything more than a perfunctory RPG, and, for a few hours at least, it isn't. The game spends a good 4-5 hours with the training wheels on, making the intro rather dull for anyone with experience of the genre, but later battles significantly pile on good ideas. *Pokémon*'s rock-paper-scissors balancing comes into its own here as you can see what combination of monsters awaits in each territory and build your team accordingly, while the maps themselves are among the smartest we've seen in the genre. Elemental tiles play to the strengths and weaknesses of each unit rather well, while unique mechanics in each area, such as flags to capture and hold, boulders you can push downhill, or squares that randomly teleport units around the map, sometimes into secret areas, would be fun in any SRPG, *Pokémon* or otherwise.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of *Pokémon Conquest*, however, is that it made us want to go back and play one of Koei's earlier, duller and more convoluted *Nobunaga* games. And any game that can make us feel that way is worthy of high praise indeed.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

RISKY BUSINESS: The map of Japan is structured so that the player has the geographical advantage from the start. Something with more vulnerable borders would be better for older players.



A SUPER EFFECTIVE CROSSOVER





Left: The crossover even creeps into the sound, with ancient drumbeats and Game Boy speaker squawks combining wonderfully.











BANG, ZOOM, STRAIGHT TO THE MOON, AKA: 'A GAME YOU SHOULD BUY'

To The Moon*

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Freebird Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 100MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



It often seems so trite to devote an obligatory paragraph in a review to go over the setting of a game, with the majority of the text taken up by mechanical descriptions of why it is fun to point a reticle at things in order to make them die.

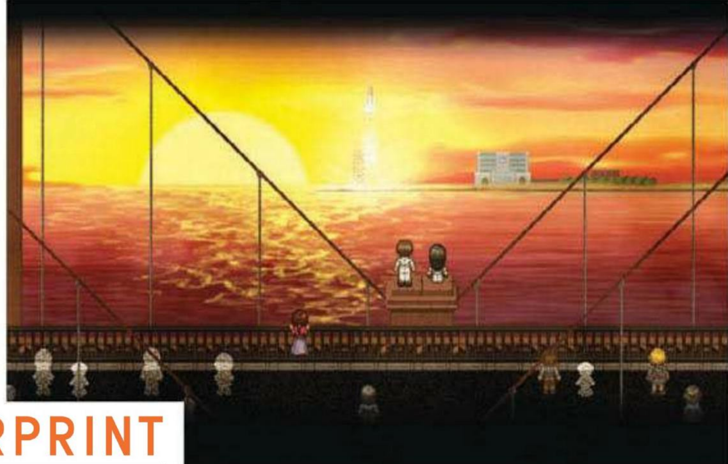
To adopt this technique in discussing *To The Moon* would be an exercise in folly. It's a game created with *RPG Maker*, bringing with it that 16-bit art style of the creation tool, so it doesn't look incredible. As a point-and-click adventure game it's lacking hugely, offering nothing in the way of puzzles of any challenge and little of anything pushing you on to perform better on the few repetitive puzzles encountered. Exploration is limited, progression is guaranteed so long as you have half a brain cell and, for all its RPG styling, there's nothing – aside from an early joke – that reflects the traditional role-playing battle system.

As a game – as something you play, with goals and challenges and people to meet, worlds to explore and hurdles to overcome – *To The Moon* really isn't much. So it comes as a surprise that it is one of the best games in recent memory.

Discussing the story in any depth ruins the experience entirely, as this is more interactive fiction than anything else, despite the 'adventure RPG' claims. What can be said is the basic premise, though: the player takes control of two doctors in an undefined time in the future. These doctors work for a firm with the ability to enter the mind of someone and change their memories, making them truly believe they have experienced a life entirely different to the one that really happened. The one drawback is that the conflict between these manufactured memories and the real ones that were actually experienced causes the brain to shut down and the subject to die. As such, the procedure is limited to use only on those at the very brink of death – like Johnny, the elderly man whose memories players will spend most of the game inside. His dying wish is to have his memories changed so he can go to the moon: a lifelong dream he had, but one he never achieved.

And that's all that can really be said without ruining what is, while sometimes clichéd to the point where the characters actively mock its tropes, one of the most deeply affecting stories we have ever seen in gaming. The journey into Johnny's past makes you laugh and tears your heart out in the same breath. It makes you have actual, real feelings as a direct result of the tale woven in front of you. *To The Moon*, for all that could be complained about in its 'traditional' failings as a game, is one of the best we've had the privilege to play.

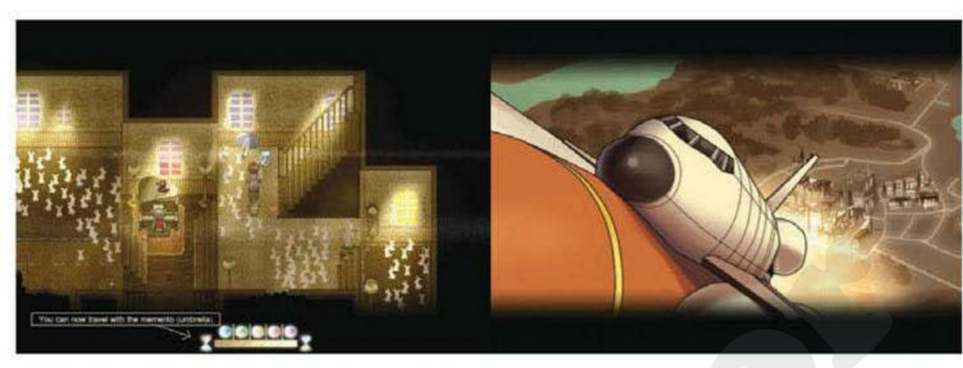
Above: The story is one of far more maturity than anything else in gaming today. Characters and their relationships are fully formed and comprised of multiple shades of grey: love, loss, humour, yearning and tragedy.



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WRITING TALENT: Really, the skill of the writing in *To The Moon* just puts many other games to shame. Granted, that's not difficult a lot of the time, but this really is special.



Above: Special mention has to be made of *To The Moon*'s soundtrack, composed in the majority by Laura Shigihara and the game's creator, Kan Gao. Not only does it suit the game perfectly, but it will be with you long after you've finished playing.



A WONDERFUL GAME, ACTUALLY LACKING 'GAME' PARTS

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10. TIMEPILOT
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14. JAZ RIGNALL

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THE DOWNLOAD GOES PHYSICAL, BUT HAS IT IMPROVED IN THE PROCESS?

Freakyforms Deluxe

Created by *Chibi-Robo!* co-director Hiroshi Moriyama, *Freakyforms Deluxe* shares two similarities. One, character voices have that same distinct style that sounds like human speech distorted and garbled up. Two, a randomly generated steel pan will occasionally fall on your head for no reason whatsoever. Neither of those details is important, but they do offer an idea of the intended tone. This is a game where lots of things happen, but rarely with much of a point.

More specifically, *Freakyforms* is a game of user-generated content. You design your own creatures, called Formees, with what has to be one of the most simple yet flexible editors we've seen. You just drag and drop shapes together and can make a functioning character in about 30 seconds. They might not look that great, but that's half the fun, as you take them out into the world and watch their stupid, spindly legs struggle with the environment or their googly eyes bounce around as you stretch and flick them through the air like an elastic band. Like all good games, it's fun to move them around the world even before you're concentrating on a goal.

It's probably for the best, as the goals themselves are pretty flimsy. You get about 300 seconds to explore the world at any one time, looking for coins, helping out previously made Formees or searching for new body parts to use. The more you play, the more you unlock, and the world expands before you, widening its horizons and populating itself with houses, trees and clouds, all of which can be customised in the editor. Yet with no real end in sight, players are expected to either try to collect as many body parts as possible so they can create and share ever sillier Formees, or just live in the moment, enjoying the daft things that happen in the world. Randomly falling steel pans, or the eggs you collect and crack open, or the way your character will occasionally do a golden poo for no reason… They all contribute to the whimsy.

New to this *Deluxe* incarnation is the addition of light RPG elements; dungeons that players can venture into to bring back more content for the editor. Sadly, all battles are automatic, but character stats are based on the design of your Formee, giving further impetus to experiment with designs. The addition of equippable special powers – some useful, some just silly – enhance both dungeon-crawling and creature design.

There's no denying the dungeons are a minor addition, however, so anyone who owns the original 3DSWare release may not see the value in upgrading to the retail version. As for everyone else, you'll need to still have that childlike sense of play and a certain ability to make your own fun – or at least some kids of your own – to get the most out of this.



DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Asobism
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





Below: In many ways, it's the 300-second time limit that makes *Freakyforms* great. It gives it an almost mobile gaming feel, allowing you to have fun in a few moments.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

FORMEES TOGETHER: The four-player creation mode has you all secretly creating Formees to a theme. It reminds us of *Bakushow*, which was made by *Chibi-Robo!*'s other co-director, Kenichi Nishi.





VERDICT 7/10
POINTLESS, BUT STILL FUN



Above: Though Nintendo says that *Freakyforms* content can be transferred to *Deluxe*, we've so far found no way to do it. Our rubbish Chibi-Robo remains trapped.



CASTLE CRASHERS

Wreckateer

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Iron Galaxy
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Expecting Kinect to be anything other than a casual-serving novelty is a fool's errand. The promise of Project Natal has passed by, replaced by a perfectly functional, acceptable and popular way to interact with uncomplicated family games.

And that's exactly what Iron Galaxy's *Wreckateer* is. It only takes seconds to work out what to do, and anyone, providing they're in a big enough room, can learn to play it straight away. The premise is pure *Angry Birds* – fling heavy things into unstable things – but *Wreckateer* is a much more enjoyable, predictable and tangible experience than Rovio's billion-dollar baby. It's a meaty, chunky sort of game, and while short-lived and a little facile, it's bloody good fun.

Wreckateer's so simple that it's almost not worth explaining – you're in control of a trebuchet and charged with knocking down goblin-built towers and castles dotted throughout this *Fable*-like universe. To do so, you yank back a rock with your hands, then let go. If it hits the target, bricks, mortar and little goblin parts will fly everywhere.

Iron Galaxy seemingly understands that Kinect isn't the most accurate of devices, though, so there's plenty of room for error and adjustment. Each level comes pre-loaded with specific projectile types. Some let you manipulate them in mid-air with nudges of your hand. Others can be exploded on impact by thrusting your palms skyward like a Village Person.

By far the best interaction, though, and probably *Wreckateer*'s raison d'être, for want of a less irritating phrase, is the flying projectile. Every level has a few of these, and they serve a dual purpose. Firstly, they allow you to fly the projectile through combo multipliers, under bridges and into doors, making you feel like a demolisher of the highest calibre. Secondly, they work beautifully with Kinect, as you stick your arms out like a plane and steer the little rocks exactly where you want them to go. For once, it's motion gaming that is superior to a pad.

There are 60-plus levels to bash through, although chances are you'll get stuck in a leaderboard battle on one of the early stages and spend most of your time there. And as we mentioned, it's worth remembering just how much room you need to play – we're talking cavernous, 12-foot spaces.

Of course, being essentially a single idea stretched, and one you've seen a dozen times before, *Wreckateer* isn't exactly the most gargantuan of experiences. It's best thought of as a party game, something to wheel out Wii-style when family is around; a breezy game with no barrier to entry. It's good to see an XBLA game sticking to the old 800 Microsoft Point price, too. Light, fun and throwaway – the perfect accompaniment to Kinect.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CHUCK ROCK: Kinect can often be a distraction when its limited capabilities are stretched beyond the breaking point, but *Wreckateer*'s uncomplicated integration actually enhances the experience.



Above: Visually, it owes a debt to *Fable*'s verdant world of Albion, although the attempts at British humour are a little off the mark. The physics, though, are worth the price of admission – chunky and satisfying.





Above: As well as the obvious *Angry Birds* comparison, there are elements of Steven Spielberg's oft-forgotten *Boom Blox* in *Wreckateer*, particularly in the way the structures come tumbling to earth. Unfortunately, you can't throw baseballs at sheep.



SMASHING STUFF

STOP BEFORE YOU DROP

Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance

Few publishers seem to invest as many resources in handheld titles as Square Enix. From the extravagantly presented *Dissidia* and *Crisis Core* on the PSP to the DS's stylishly realised *The World Ends With You*, the company has an enviable string of portable console hits that comes from truly exploring the limits of each piece of hardware. *Kingdom Hearts 3D* brings that mentality to the 3DS, with fully voiced cut-scenes, an extensive soundtrack, and extraordinary use of the 3D capability, even if it represents another creatively steady point in the series' trajectory.

The latest in a long line of spin-offs that bridge the apparently endless gap between *Kingdom Hearts II* and *III*, *Dream Drop Distance* sees series stalwarts Sora and Riku trying to become Keyblade Masters, the equivalent of Jedi in *KH* speak. To explain the minutiae of the story would require diving into the series' history, which is bafflingly complex for a franchise that features Donald Duck and Goofy in prominent roles, so to put it simply, Sora and Riku are exploring worlds that have been 'split', with their two storylines taking place in realities that exist next to one another. You take on the roles of both characters, with the structure of the game built around 'Dropping', a fancy title for jumping back and forth between them.

Dropping can be prompted at any time through the menu screen, but the Drop bar is also counting down all the time, and will always chuck you back to the other protagonist when it reaches zero – which is particularly annoying when it drags you out of a boss fight. Collecting 'Drop' points lets you slow down this timer for the next round, but it all amounts to little more than a gimmicky and convoluted way of switching between the two heroes.

The Drop mechanic has the hallmarks of a feature that wasn't thought out properly. On the one hand, it's entertaining to switch combat styles between Sora and Riku, who each have a different rhythm and spin on the traditional *Kingdom Hearts* combat, but the order of levels is set up the same for both characters, and there's no way to deviate from this string of locales without the enemies being too strong. It's a little like switching to another save game in the same section of an RPG: spending too much time in identical locations drags them out beyond their natural lifespan, even with the individual storylines, boss battles and occasional character-specific areas to explore. It's all too similar, with no real payoff.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Left: Diving is a tacky and annoying replacement for the Gummi Ship sections from the main instalments. It's basically a mini-game where the player has to beat an enemy or collect stars down a big tunnel.



Be thankful, then, that the production values in *Dream Drop Distance* are so extensive, since that is one area where these handheld *Kingdom Hearts* offshoots have traditionally been a little patchy. The voice-acting and translation is at an all-time high, even if the overarching story is, as mentioned, absolute nonsense. The crucial Disney worlds encompass more hits than misses, with *Tron Legacy*'s blue-hued environments tackling that movie's extraordinary visuals with technical mastery, as well as lending Nintendo's handheld its most validating use of 3D yet. That's the geekiest

Right: The *Tron Legacy* level feels like a real treat, aided by a Light Cycle sequence that smartly doesn't outstay its welcome. Not that it takes much, but this level alone is superior to the diabolical *Tron Evolution*.

TRON LEGACY'S BLUE-HUED ENVIRONMENTS LEND NINTENDO'S HANDHELD ITS MOST VALIDATING USE OF 3D YET

FURTHER READING: KINGDOM HEARTS 3D | PREVIEW | ISSUE 123 | PAGE 57



KINGDOM HEARTS: BIRTH BY SLEEP

AS GOOD AS





WORSE THAN

KINGDOM HEARTS II

FAQs

Q. ARE THERE ANY TRADITIONAL DISNEY SUMMONS?
They're replaced by the Spirits, which are a mixture between party members and summons from the previous games.

Q. IS THIS ACCESSIBLE FOR NEWCOMERS?
Sadly not, though an endless series of videos and text files try to fill in the blanks.

Q. HASN'T SQUARE ENIX EXHAUSTED EVERY DISNEY WORLD BY NOW?
Well, there's still *Homeward Bound*, *Atlantis*, *National Treasure*, *Treasure Planet*, *Bolt* and *Cool Runnings*, at the least.

THE QUESTION OF THREE

While *Kingdom Hearts III* has yet to enter production and won't do so until after *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*'s release – like that's supposed to fill us with confidence – both *Dream Drop Distance* and *Birth By Sleep* have built on the acrobatic element of the hack-and-slash gameplay, making moves easier to access and putting QTEs in a more prominent position. This is the obvious curve of the franchise – a focus on real-time combat and finding ways to innovate based on that. It's the one thing Square Enix is getting better at with each *Kingdom Hearts* title, so expect the third game in the series, when it finally turns up, to zone in on this feature quite heavily.



highlight, but the others, including the returning Traverse Town, are in the ballpark of the PS2 games in terms of their scale and detail. There's definitely enough high-end Disney content to conjure up goodwill from the player.

Key to the progression system in *Kingdom Hearts 3D* are Spirits, which are reverse versions of the game's enemies, called Nightmares. The player creates them using materials dotted around the worlds, and they act as party members, backing Sora and Riku up in battle, as well as governing special attacks. There's a whole host of Spirits to create, but there are several drawbacks: primarily, the appalling character designs for each Spirit, which are like rejected cutesy anime creature concepts, seemingly completely at odds with the usually stellar art direction associated with Square Enix games.

Secondly, there's a menu screen where you interact with the Spirits in a tedious *Nintendogs*-style fashion, playing mini-games with them, taking photographs against your surroundings and prodding them with the stylus to indicate affection. You can even colour them in. It's utterly arbitrary game design, with more than a whiff of feature creep. Irritatingly, learning new abilities hinges on developing these creatures properly, so even the most cold-hearted players will invariably find themselves rubbing a cartoon bat just to learn the Curaga spell. Without these awful touch screen asides, the boardgame-style ability trees are actually smartly implemented ways of augmenting the two heroes, recalling *Final Fantasy X*'s Sphere Grid in a smaller fashion.

That's symptomatic of *Kingdom Hearts 3D*'s confused collection of mechanics, however, which deliver the impression that Square Enix doesn't quite know where the series is supposed to go next. The combat is basically identical to that in *Birth By Sleep*, with a few satisfying acrobatic additions and stylus-based extra moves, yet the Drop system exposes the weaknesses of the game, and we can't really see it being a keeper for future instalments. What was exciting about *Kingdom Hearts*' real-time combat ten years ago is still thrilling now, while the mash-up between Square and Disney has proven to be sustainable and great fun, aided this time by the especially nerdy cameos from the cast of Nomura's cult hit, *The World Ends With You*. There's a mixture of novelty and intelligent ideas in *Dream Drop Distance* that don't quite add up to an evolved form of what the series has shown us before. It's another sideways step for *Kingdom Hearts*, then, but undeniably a grandiose one.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SWITCHEROO: We'd get rid of the Drop mechanic. A change to the structure would be ideal, with the characters able to visit the worlds in any order. That way, the feeling of repetition wouldn't be as strong.

VERDICT 7/10
A FORMULA REACHING THE LIMITS OF ITS POTENTIAL

AS TRADITIONAL AS SPIKY HAIR AND CROP TOPS

Tales Of Graces F

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Wii
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Namco Tales Studio
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

AGAREST: GENERATIONS OF WAR ZERO





LOST ODYSSEY

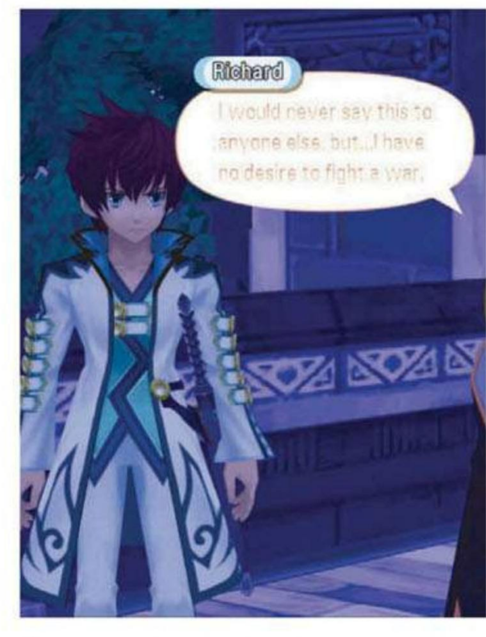
WORSE THAN

It has seemed to us of late – though we are prepared to accept it may be a subjective observation – that the Japanese RPG genre has been stuck in a rut for some considerable length of time now. True, there have been some exceptions across the span of this current generation. *Lost Odyssey*'s adult tone was, many believe, enough to stand it apart, and *Dark Souls*, well, is *Dark Souls*.

But for every rarity, there are a dozen or more that stick so closely to the middle of the road that you can accurately predict moment-to-moment what will be said, how each battle will play out. Some JRPGs are so unimaginative that playing through each inevitable moment very quickly becomes a chore. *Tales Of Graces F* is the epitome of this type.

Following the story of young Asbel, son of a local nobleman in the village of Lhant, the first few hours of the game take place when he is a child. Perhaps it is because we are thirty-somethings that we didn't wholly enjoy such exciting tasks as 'reach the top of the hill to look at the flowers', but this portion of the game is largely spent marvelling at how, five minutes in, we've already met the mysterious girl, Sophie, who has amnesia (naturally), and disowned our father because he won't let us 'keep' her – a person Asbel never before met and to whom he owes nothing, yet is already declaring he will protect until the day he dies.

Most of this period of the game, however, is spent whacking bouncy turnips with a wooden stick as you're taught the ins and outs of combat. If you're taking the time to read this review, chances are you played *Tales Of Vesperia* on the Xbox 360. Combat here – and a great deal of other elements – is much the same. Artes are moves split into two different types: A-Artes and B-Artes, the former physical, the latter magically infused. Although attacking and blocking take place in



Above: The dethroned and betrayed Prince Richard is at the centre of Asbel's quests and goals. For no adequate reason whatsoever.

Below: If you were wondering where the 'kooky' female character stereotype with the annoying voice and flirtatious manner is, there she is on the right.

THE ENTIRE CAST OF CHARACTERS ARE SO IMMATURE THAT IT REALLY WAS A STRUGGLE FOR US TO FIND ANY LEVEL ON WHICH WE COULD IDENTIFY WITH THEM

Below: *Tales Of Graces F* puts invisible walls in your way for a host of ludicrously Eighties reasons. Here, we have to talk to three random townspeople before this invisible blockage will let us leave, even though we already know where we're supposed to be going.



real-time, there is still some turn-based stuff going on beneath the surface. The number of attacks you can combo together each 'round' is determined by the weapon you are holding and by a counter on your character's portrait, which sits at the bottom of the screen during combat. When not attacking, the number recharges very quickly. Combat, then, is a matter of attack, block, recharge, repeat.

There is more nuance, of course. The AI characters in your party can be programmed to do certain things and behave in particular ways, and swords and armour can be upgraded by 'Dualizing' them – mixing rare items to supply them with additional effects. Our biggest issue with the combat system is that it just doesn't feel all that tactical. For us, an RPG's battles should tend a little more towards brain than brawn, and we couldn't help but feel that the combat in *Tales Of Graces F* was not only quite mashy-mashy at times, but was also very similar no matter what it was we were fighting.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

FIGHT: Although not wholly in favour of Tales Of Graces' combat over a number of other JRPG systems, it is an improvement on that seen in Tales Of Vesperia. It has more layers. Still mashy, though.

It could also feel very random at times. One boss attempt may end in the party being entirely wiped out, and the very next attempt, even though we didn't go about it differently, saw the beast utterly trounced. This happened a lot.

Tales Of Graces F is just so old-fashioned. Take navigation, for example. Given the choice, surely any well-designed game, JRPG or otherwise, would choose to offer players a map with their objective marked on it? In fairness, it sometimes does, when the mission is of huge story importance and when you're travelling outside the limits of the game's towns and cities. But within the settlements themselves, it's often as clear as mud where you're supposed to go next, and this is the truly bizarre bit: rather than tell you where to go or mark it on your map, the game instead puts temporary invisible walls in all the places you're *not* supposed to go. The result? A lot of frustrated walking around and tutting.

Asbel grows up, and while playing him as a teenaged knight is marginally preferable to playing him as a child, the entire cast of characters are so immature that it really was a struggle for us to find any level on which we could identify with them. *Tales Of Graces F* consistently makes stabs at pathos whose payoffs it hasn't a hope of earning with its simplistic, on-the-nose dialogue, and has its characters swearing to fulfil missions they have no apparent reason to accept. It all falls flat.

Equally irritating, to our minds, is that in all but a sprinkling of cut-scenes throughout the game, speech bubbles appear from the characters' mouths, which would not be such a problem were it not for the fact that *Tales Of Graces F* is fully voiced. Why is it that, in Japanese games particularly, we are forced to read the words we're already hearing?

That is not to say that *Tales Of Graces F* is completely without its charms. Certainly, for the younger gamer, the type that is not as cynical and bitter as us critics have inevitably become, there is a fair bit to like. Visually, things look pretty close to hand-drawn anime – an illusion sometimes destroyed by the intercutting of actual hand-drawn anime. It's bright and colourful and happy. But if you put any value in the game mechanics that have arrived over the last 20 years with a mind to prevent tantrum-inducing frustration, you might want to steer clear.

SKIT SCAT

Like *Tales Of Vesperia* before it, *Tales Of Graces F* contains skits: little contextually activated optional cut-scenes in which the characters talk about something happening right at that moment – usually something in the environment. It is, in short, pure, blunt exposition. A clock tower, for example, might have a skit activation point near it, and the characters will wax on for a couple of minutes about its whole history. We challenge anybody to find these interesting. We learned very quickly that the start button brings up the option to skip, and a little later we hit upon the notion that it was probably best not to even activate them in the first place.





VERDICT 6/10

VERY, VERY KIDSY. VERY, VERY SAMEY

BLOCK OF AGES

Thomas Was Alone*

Could 2012 be the year of the indie? Not only have the likes of *Fez*, *Lone Survivor*, *Home* and *Dear Esther* shaken up the gaming establishment and shown just how much promise and power there is outside of the traditional publishing industry, but indie games now have their own movie too. And even among that tide of quality and imagination, the pick of the bunch has to be Mike Bithell's marvellous, warm, witty and utterly English platform puzzler, *Thomas Was Alone*.

Looking at the screenshots won't really do it justice. It is, after all, a heartwarming tale of friendships and co-operation between AI rectangles who are slowly becoming sentient. Over 100 levels of physical and spatial platforming, you get to know and love Thomas, Chris, John and a host of other similarly named quadrilaterals, thanks in no small part to some fantastic writing and a brilliant narration by TV and *Assassin's Creed*'s own Danny Wallace.

Bithell has managed to inject more character and personality into a troop of geometric shapes than most games manage with action heroes made up of millions of polygons. The voiceover is a large part of that, but also the physical traits of each block are intrinsically linked to their character. Thomas is an everyman, capable of moderately high jumps, while Chris is short, squat and grumpy. John is tall and can leap higher than the rest, making him supremely confident. That is, until he meets Sarah...

The influences are clear – it has *Portal*'s whimsical science, *Head Over Heels*' co-operative teamwork and even a touch of *Everyday Shooter*'s stark but inviting visuals, but *Thomas Was Alone* is very much its own beast. Throughout the century of levels, where the player must guide all the blocks to the white-outlined portal exits, so many gameplay ideas are explored and executed that it's astonishing. Just when you think you've seen everything the game has to offer, it completely turns its entire rulebook on its head.

Thomas Was Alone is a smart, savvy puzzler, but one that's also more than the sum of its angular parts. The way the narration, bare visuals and soaring music combine is a glorious three-way marriage made in geometric heaven. David Housden's spectacular score adds weight and gravitas to every action, no matter how fiddly. It's astonishing stuff.

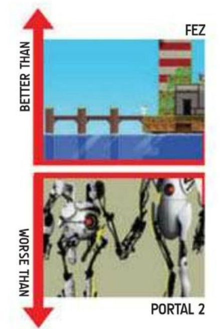
While a few technical hiccups do occasionally spoil the party – there's a touch of latency in the jumping controls and the odd minor bug that makes matters slightly confusing – there's so little to fault in Bithell's striking debut. This is a game to admire, to enjoy and evangelise; a thoroughly English slice of indie magic that is every bit as accomplished as anything with a budget and a team. If this truly is the year of the indie, then long may it continue.

VERDICT 9/10
IT'S HIP TO BE SQUARE



DETAILS

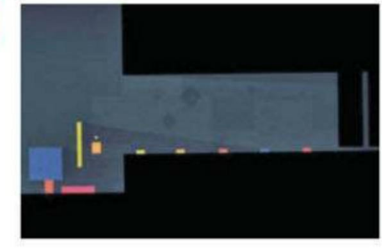
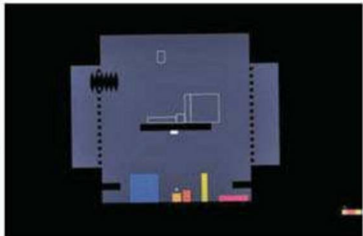
FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Self-published
DEVELOPER: Mike Bithell
PRICE: £5.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: N/A
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



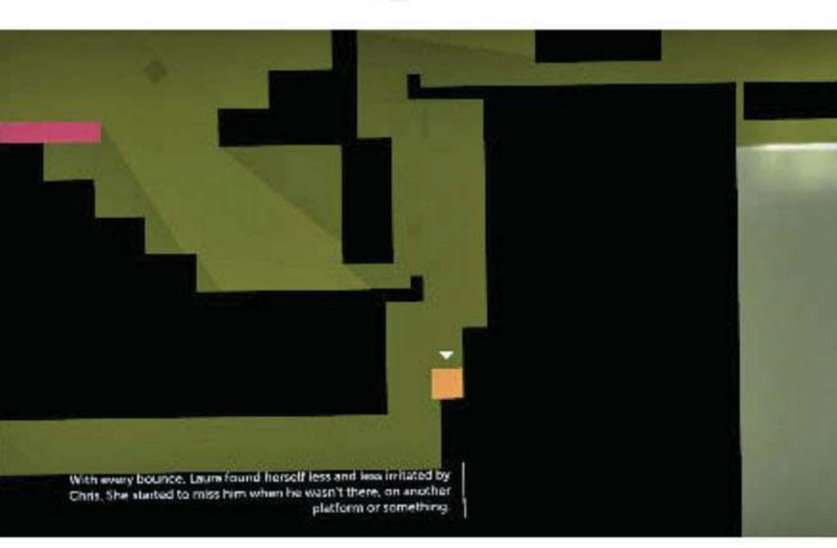
FINGERPRINT

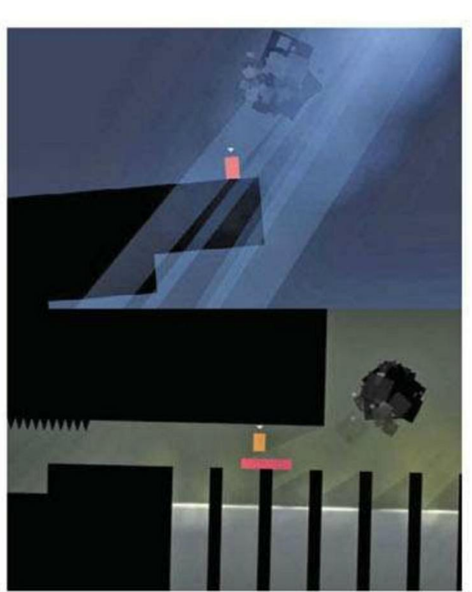
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

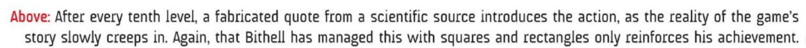
SQUAREPUSHER: They may only be coloured squares and rectangles, but they're more memorable, charming and relatable than any game characters you could care to mention.

Below: Bithell has proven himself not only a master of mechanics but also a shrewd creator of experiences. Without its stirring score and witty, knowing narration, *Thomas Was Alone* would still be a fine puzzler. With them, though, it's so much more.







Above: After every tenth level, a fabricated quote from a scientific source introduces the action, as the reality of the game's story slowly creeps in. Again, that Bithell has managed this with squares and rectangles only reinforces his achievement.

Below: We're pretty sure that's not quite how the bike looked in the movie. Honestly, it's like the square wheels of *Enter The Matrix*'s cars all over again...





Above: The Bane fight is one of the most confusing things we've ever played. You wail on him for a bit, get a few cut-scenes where he hits you harder, then the level ends.







THE CRAZY QUILT OF BATMAN GAMES

The Dark Knight Rises

It must be pretty tricky to make a decent *Batman* game based on a film where Batman isn't actually in it all that much. But in the interest of making sure fans have a companion piece – and definitely not just spinning a quick buck or five – Gameloft has risen to the challenge. There's no level where you play as Bruce Wayne and just mope around the East Wing of Wayne Manor a bit, sadly. And for some reason the pit is full of armed guards against whom to spam the punch button and slowly level up so you can make the QTE climb to freedom, which somehow manages to ram the point that you are rising even further down your throat than the film did. But that's not even the worst of it.

Ambitious it may be, but in a world where even Rockstar's open-world crime lord can't make the iPad sing, you have to wonder what hope Gameloft has. *The Dark Knight Rises* adopts a similar structure to *Arkham City*, allowing players to don the cowl and glide around Gotham at their leisure, this time following a version of the movie as retold by someone who wasn't really paying attention. And there's not even a hint of Rocksteady's polish, either – it's like trying to play an old PS2 *Batman* game on the worst emulator ever coded. The frame rate frequently descends into slide show territory and chugs near-constantly, while glitches, pop-in and bugs – which come in both visual and gameplay flavours – are everywhere, making the whole thing feel amateurish. Even the controls don't behave most of the time, the virtual controller a nightmare to use at the best of times while simple tasks like grappling up to a rooftop are a chore.

Combat, on the flip side, isn't half bad. Sure, it's a low-rent clone of *Arkham City*'s counter-centric clobbering and there's little to no skill involved, but it's still a clear highlight when everything else is so dismal. Worst of all is the decision to follow the pay-to-win/freemium model with in-app purchases – having dropped a fiver on the game in the first place, we can't imagine many people will be fronting an extra £70 just to fill Batman's virtual wallet with play money. It's utterly shameless, though the saddest part is that it's clearly a model that works.

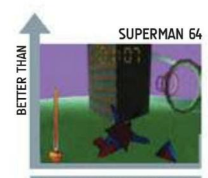
Add in some horrible vehicle sections that somehow make it even harder to navigate Gotham and you've got yourself a traditionally poor movie tie-in that almost feels intentionally dreadful to meet expectations. If seeing *The Dark Knight Rises* has inspired you to put the cape back on, do yourself a favour and go back to either of Rocksteady's games instead. Because this one is wearing hockey pads.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros
DEVELOPER: Gameloft
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SUPERMAN 64







WORSE THAN

BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THINK BIGGER: Games like *Infinity Blade* work on the iPad because they are designed around it. Taking a console design and expecting it to play well with a mess of on-screen buttons just doesn't work.







VERDICT 3/10

AS GOOD AS THE MOVIE'S ENDING

AT LEAST SOMETHING GOOD CAME OUT OF SAKAGUCHI'S TIME IN HAWAII

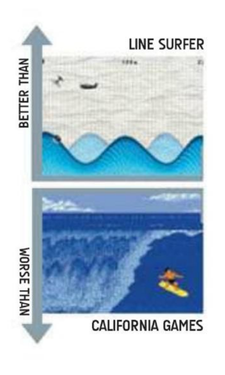
Party Wave

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Mistwalker
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

LINE SURFER



CALIFORNIA GAMES

WORSE THAN

Games like *Party Wave* are exactly what makes mobile gaming so special. Out in the real world of publisher-dominated, market-driven console games, Hironobu Sakaguchi is shackled to the genre that made his name, turning out one big-budget RPG after another, until he either goes out of business, retires, dies or goes out of business, retires and dies. But on iOS, he can take a personal passion like surfing, a hobby he picked up while making the *Final Fantasy* movie in Hawaii, and turn it into a videogame that exists for the purest of reasons: to be fun.

So that's what makes iOS great. But is *Party Wave* itself a great game? Well, it won't turn Mistwalker into a sports-focused studio overnight, but it is a pretty accomplished take on the pastime. Split into two sections, the first has you pushing surfers toward the point at which a wave breaks, then, when it does, the game smoothly transitions into the surfing bit where you tap on each surfer, spinning plate-style, to keep from wiping out until the time's up.

Below: Tap a surfer right at the bottom of a wave and they'll do a big jump and score lots of points. But it's a significant risk, as you could slip off the bottom or get stung by a jellyfish.



With each stage, the number of obstacles – usually dolphins or other sea creatures, but occasionally wackier nuisances like UFOs – will increase and generally get in the way, making a perfect run, in which every surfer lasts till the end, that bit harder.

Completionists will aim to get a perfect run on every stage, of course, but *Party Wave* is just as much fun as a simple distraction. There's something soothing about its chilled-out presentation, and the act of tapping a little cartoon surfer to make them flip around is the sort of amusing toy that could make sitting through an epic *Final Fantasy* cut-scene that little bit more bearable.

VERDICT 6/10

SIMPLE, UNCOMPLICATED FUN. A BIT LIKE SURFING, REALLY

DRAG ON QUEST

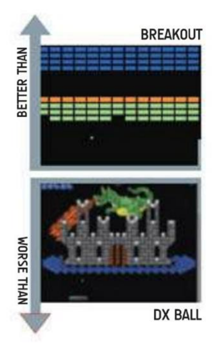
Wizorb

DETAILS

FORMAT: Mac
OTHER FORMATS: Linux, PC, PlayStation 3, PSP, PS Vita, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Tribute Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

BREAKOUT

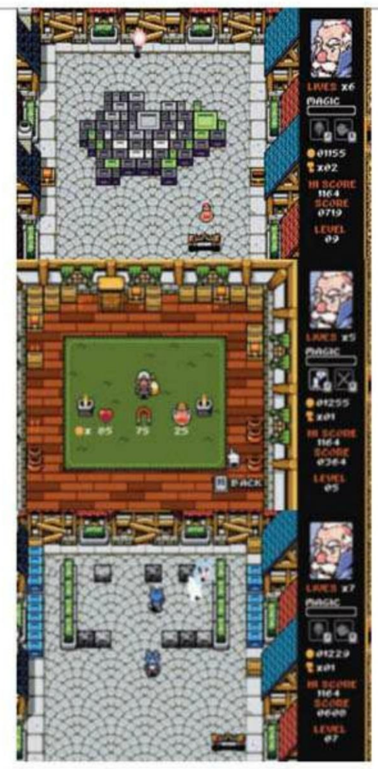


DX BALL

WORSE THAN

Developed by Tribute Games – an indie studio led by the designer of Ubisoft's *Scott Pilgrim* videogame – *Wizorb* is a debut that epitomises the company's approach to design: taking well-worn games of yesteryear, applying a bit of a spin, and coating them in glorious pixel art. In this instance, the spin is a *Breakout* clone, mixed with the presentation and some of the tropes of a Japanese RPG.

As with any *Breakout* clone, the aim is simply to break all of the bricks on screen by keeping a ball in the air, but in this case you also have a couple of spells up your sleeve. A click of the left mouse button uses black magic, which means something like a fireball that will destroy bricks or enemies that wander around, interfering with the ball, while the right mouse button unleashes supportive white magic, like a gust of wind used to influence the ball's direction.



Above: Though *Wizorb* is available on a number of formats, it's naturally better on a computer thanks to the speed and accuracy of mouse control.

The JRPG metaphor of the presentation is pleasing enough, making you feel like you're achieving something less abstracted than in your typical *Breakout* game, but it might not be the best fit for this genre. By limiting power-ups to two at a time, the game lacks the dynamism and unpredictability of something like *Arkanoid*, while ducking into shop screens to buy extra lives or top up magic power only slows the pace down further. The structure, meanwhile, which demands you complete a chunk of about 12 levels before you can move on to another area or save the game, is a little misjudged in that it diminishes the potential to enjoy *Wizorb* in bite-sized chunks.

Still, if you're a *Breakout* fanatic, you could do far worse than play *Wizorb*, while the joyful presentation and verve for experimentation marks Tribute Games as an indie studio to look out for in the future. This is a developer that is sure to amass a passionate cult following, so why not get involved from the start?

VERDICT 5/10

A BIT OF A GRIND

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF NINTENDO'S ESHOP'S OFFERINGS

Planet Crashers

Nintendo's eShop remains, in many ways, uncharted ground, especially in terms of breeding successful videogames. On that subject, it takes a brave developer to shift a title away from the normal retail channels into the digital realm. Renegade Kid has such courage. Originally planned to be released in a more conventional manner, its latest offering, *Planet Crashers*, makes its debut through Nintendo's online store and is far more agreeable because of it.

Built around the very basics of an RPG, *Planet Crashers* stands as almost a role-playing game for those who aren't overly familiar with the genre. It has a structure in which you continually have to activate quests before being able to pursue them, and it's a constant source of frustration to repeatedly have to go through numerous menus just to kick one into gear – Renegade Kid doesn't seem to have any interest in the seamless structure that many other RPGs have worked towards in the last few years. This may have been a conscious choice, however, as the focus does seem to be on combat. Relying on the tried and tested methods of yesteryear, the turn-based system is solid, made slightly more interesting thanks to the *Paper Mario*-like addition of well-timed button presses increasing the power of attacks. It's deliberately simple, and there's certainly an addictive quality to it, even though the system never really evolves as *Planet Crashers* progresses. Much like the experience as a whole, the developer tries to cover up the cracks with a fair share of humour – at times you'll be asked to use a banana as a weapon, for example – but it just becomes a little tedious the longer you play. If you've ever put any serious time into the likes of *Golden Sun*, this simply isn't going to be able to hold your attention over a serious period of time. The pace is far too slow.

This arduous implementation continues too, mainly because of Renegade Kid's strange ways of implementing its narrative. An interesting and captivating story is how so many RPGs have managed to be received better than their mechanics should allow; why *Planet Crashers* pretty much ignores plot is a mystery. It's certainly there for those who have the patience to seek it out, but it's never obviously apparent, instead sitting in the background in case anyone fancies involving themselves with it. Ensuring the story was an unmissable thrill ride would have been a smarter choice.

Planet Crashers is still an entertaining role-playing game, mostly due to its tongue-in-cheek approach that never takes its characters or world too seriously. If it had just firmed up its core, Renegade Kid could have made it significantly more desirable than it currently is. For a downloadable title currently on the eShop, however, it shows the potential is there.

VERDICT 5/10
NOT THE GAME IT COULD OR SHOULD HAVE BEEN

Below: It's the combat where most players will find the majority of the enjoyment, simply because that's where *Planet Crashers* shows the most depth. You'll have to be a fan of the turn-based system, but it's more than solid.



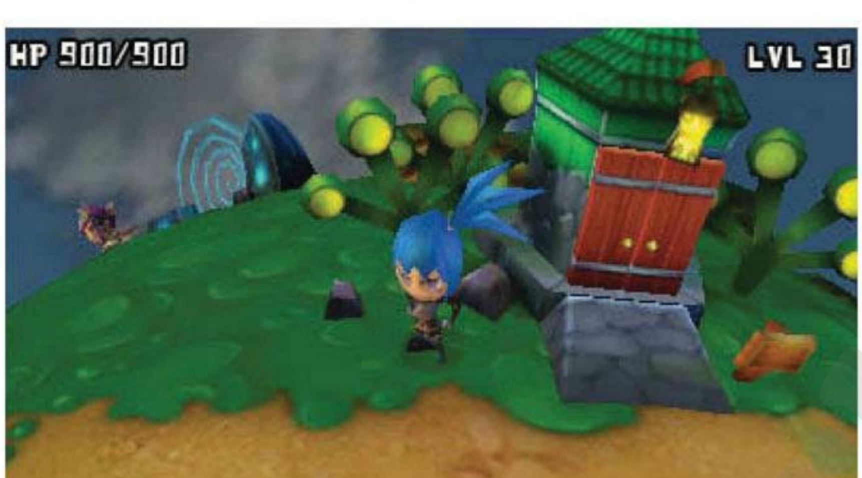
DETAILS
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Renegade Kid
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.00
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: NARUTO: PATH OF THE NINJA 2
WORSE THAN: GOLDEN SUN: DARK DAWN



MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

A CLASSIC: The lack of a prominent story makes *Planet Crashers* hard to care about over long periods as, after a while, you'll wonder what the hell the point is to any of it.

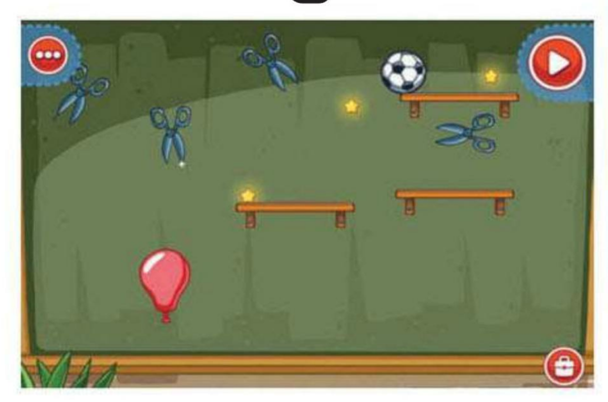




Above: Renegade Kid has made the smart decision to keep all elements light-hearted and, in a way, humorous, allowing it to get away with more than it would have done otherwise. The lack of story hurts proceedings hugely, though.

QUITE GOOD ALEX WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE APPROPRIATE

Amazing Alex





Above: *Amazing Alex*'s art style is very similar to *Angry Birds* and Chillingo's *Cut The Rope*, and its attempts at building a story around the idea is a credit to Rovio's creativity. It just lacks the immediate appeal of its predecessor.

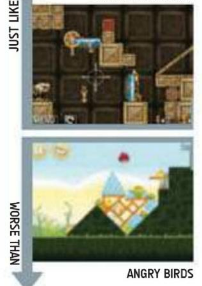
'From the makers of *Angry Birds*'. Such is the success of Rovio Entertainment's iOS-dominating franchise, these words are all that were needed to ensure that, at the very least, *Amazing Alex* was capable of receiving far more interest than your usual mobile game. And that it did. Proving that Rovio has far more up its sleeve than hurling winged animals at devious pigs, its first offering after *Angry Birds Space* is a slight departure from what many might be expecting.

Following the physics-based adventures of the title character, the idea at *Amazing Alex*'s heart is to move certain objects in order to complete the goal of a specific level. An early task, for example, revolves around shifting numerous tables and a selection of books into the correct place so that a ball can make its way into a basket. If it all sounds a little basic, that's because it is, but it's simple in the same way as *Angry Birds*, the real joy coming in how addictive it slowly becomes. Although it starts off with such menial tasks, before long Rovio is asking you to arrange multiple items to guide a group of floating balloons into a ruthless pair of scissors. Each objective is left deliberately ambiguous to a degree, as is the placement of the furniture, to try to encourage the player to view the landscape and decide what makes sense. Due to this, *Amazing Alex* is a little less engaging or captivating than Rovio's previous title, but ultimately more interesting over longer periods. It challenges your brain in a more cerebral way.

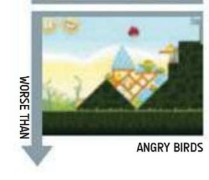
Although this means it's a far better game structurally, it lacks that magic or immediacy that's so apparent with *Angry Birds*, and a large reason for its triumph. In a way, it's almost unfair to compare the two, such are their differences, but *Amazing Alex*'s core idea – a physics-inspired puzzle game – only ranks alongside what else is on offer rather than blowing them out of the water. If you're used to this type of experience, you won't find too much that's new here; many may prefer rivals that have been released for some time. What's important, however, is that Rovio has laid foundations that can be easily built upon, its imagination being the only real hurdle that could hold it back. It should be commended for daring to try something different, rather than just resting on a proven formula. *Angry Birds* will remain its showpiece, no doubt, but *Amazing Alex* could very well be the game that proves the company's long-term worth as a development studio in the mobile space.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Rovio Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A







FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

REALISM: It's certainly nothing new, but *Amazing Alex* is a fine competitor to all of the physics-based mobile puzzle experiences. The difference is an attempt at tying it in with a story, even if it is weak.

VERDICT 7/10

A NICE, SOLID ADDITION TO ROVIO'S CATALOGUE

Below: Each puzzle isn't instantly apparent, asking for a bit of intellect on the player's part to observe the situation and see what makes sense. When you reach the game's later stages, it becomes really rather tough.






"UNLIKE ANYTHING WE´VE EVER SEEN ON THE XBOX 360..."
-TEAM XBOX
"THE WORLD - OR AT LEAST THE CARIBBEAN - IS YOURS!"
-INSIDE GAMING
"...A LOT MORE THAN JUST SAVVY TRADING."
-IGN
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Left: The action never really takes its foot off the gas, aside from a couple of breather moments where the player is able to choose when to trigger the next wave. Other than that, it's non-stop – and overwhelming – from the very first level.

ORCS MUST NOT BE REASONED WITH, CHATTED TO OR ALLOWED THROUGH

Orcs Must Die! 2

Figure out what was bad first time around. Fix it. Release it as a sequel. We'd guess there's a notice board at Robot Entertainment somewhere in its offices with that simple mantra emblazoned proudly, because it's exactly what the studio has done with *Orcs Must Die! 2*. Well, aside from leaving that irritating exclamation mark in there – but you can't have everything.

For the uninitiated, *OMD!2* is a variation on the tower defence genre, pitting players in direct control of one of two characters. Either the War Mage – returning from the first game and preferring a brute force, direct method of combat – or the Sorcerer – a new character and one who brings a slightly more cerebral, hands-off approach to matters – can be chosen by the player, and each offers a different enough experience that you will want to change up who you play as when the inevitable second, third, fourth, ninth playthrough emerges.

The basic setup goes like this: there are rifts from which orcs will begin to spurt. You have to defend your base/portal from said orcs. Before they arrive, you can set up traps around the level to slow, harm and outright obliterate the onrushing horde. It's a strategic and thoughtful process, which allows the player all the time they need – at least initially – and makes for some truly inventive slapped together multi-traps, like our 'springboard launch into onrushing minecart that knocks them into a spike pit' triple header we were oh so proud of.

Once the traps are set and the action begins, it plays out like a straightforward third-person shooter/action game, with the player scuttling around, picking off any who make it through the wall of traps and generally battering/shooting the bad guys. And it's a hell of a lot of fun pretty much all the time.

Intensity of orc attacks increase, as you would expect, and it becomes harder with each wave to keep the masses at bay, especially with newer, more difficult enemies turning up all the time. When they started shooting back...

But the biggest and best addition to *OMD!2* is two-player co-operative, which for some reason wasn't in the first game. Without it there's fun to be had, despite some frustrating difficulty walls at times, but played with another human it becomes an absolutely fantastic experience – at least if you're both on the same wavelength and your partner isn't lacking in the whole 'strategic planning' department.

The aforementioned difficulty spikes do harm the experience somewhat, and there's not a huge amount of game to *Orcs Must Die! 2* – though you will likely replay a number of times thanks to the unlock/upgrade system. But these are minor issues in what is a very good game indeed, and well worth every penny of its relatively minute asking price.

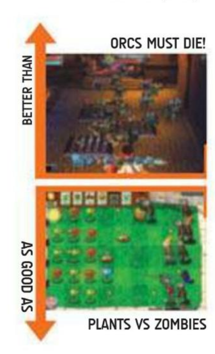
VERDICT 8/10
WORTH EVERY PENNY AND PLENTY MORE

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

OBVIOUS ADDITION: It was odd that the first game didn't have co-operative play. This one does, though, and it benefits hugely as a result, adding depth, longevity and more fun to proceedings.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Robot Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GHz dual core, 2GB RAM, GeForce 6800 or Radeon X1950 or better with minimum 256MB VRAM, 5GB HDD space, Windows XP/Vista/7





Right: Playing alone is still a lot of fun, but there are points where it feels like maybe this wasn't designed to be played entirely alone. Some levels feel that bit too big to be managed without the help of another.

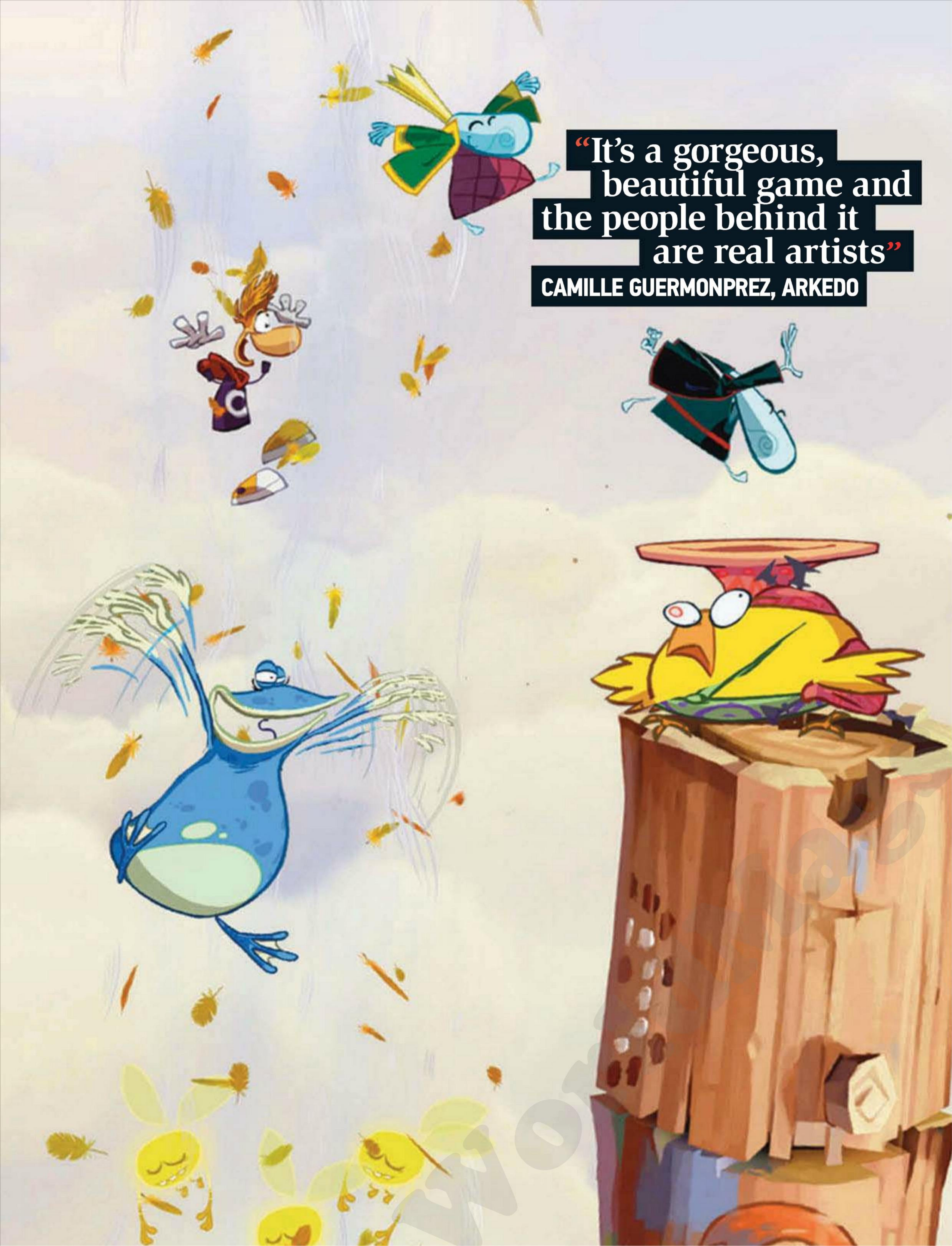


WHY I ❤...

Rayman Origins

CAMILLE GUERMONPREZ, ARKEDO

I was recently blown away by Rayman Origins. *Absolutely blown away both technically and artistically. It's a gorgeous, beautiful game and the people behind it are real artists. I'd just like to say thank you. Thank you, Mr Ancel. My whole family is a big fan of his work, when they should frankly be a big fan of mine. I think it's great right now because there are so many fantastic games like* Journey *and* Super Meat Boy, *and it's a mix between high-level production and indies. Now it is cool to say in the same sentence that I was blown away by* Rayman Origins *and* Super Meat Boy. *You're talking about multimillion-dollar games and a very small project. It's a great future.*



> "It's a gorgeous, beautiful game and the people behind it are real artists"
>
> **CAMILLE GUERMONPREZ, ARKEDO**

RETRO

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BEHIND THE SCENES

DESTRUCTION DERBY

Time to buckle up and keep your wits about you. Destruction Derby certainly made you drive hard, as makers Martin Edmondson and Robert Troughton explain



Released: 1995
Format PlayStation, PC, Saturn
Publisher: Psygnosis
Developer: Reflections Interactive

KEY STAFF:
Martin Edmondson: designer and 3D modelling
Robert Troughton: programmer
Michael Troughton: programmer
Elliot Sumner: music and sound effects

"I DEVELOPED A fascination with smashing up cars at an early age," confides Martin Edmondson, relishing a stark memory of what sounds like an eventful youth. He admits it was a rather unhealthy obsession but one born from his father, who would take him to watch real stock car racing, usually in Lancashire where his grandparents lived.

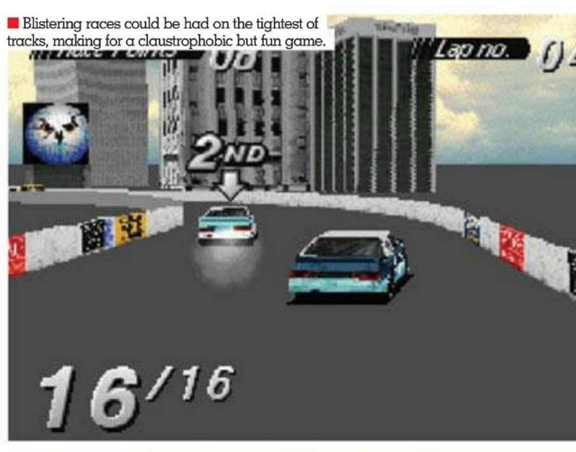
"Between each round I would hop over the fence and run around the cars, examining the damage as they were towed off to be hammered back into shape for the next 'race'," he smiles. "When I was old enough to have a camera, I used to take loads of photos too."

The experience didn't damage him, but it stuck. In 1984, Edmondson founded Reflections Interactive in Newcastle and, five years later, produced *Shadow Of The Beast* for the Amiga to great acclaim. In 1999, he would create the first of a series of games called *Driver*, but in the midst of all that, he took the experience of stock cars – "It was called banger racing in the UK," he says – and drew much inspiration from it.

"I wanted to make a game that was based on smashing cars 'realistically'," he says. "And I had wanted to do this since I became involved in videogame design in the early Eighties. The problem was that no computer or console was capable of doing it effectively, so the idea was something that was put to one side."

When PCs became more advanced and then the PlayStation was launched, it brought with it the moment that allowed Edmondson's idea to become reality. Computers and consoles suddenly had enough power to allow the job to be done, and by this time Edmondson had been speaking with one of his company's programmers, Michael Troughton, about such a project. Together they had begun to come up with concepts and designs.

The thrust of their new game was something they envisaged being called *Demolition Derby*, and the essence of it was to smash cars together and cause maximum damage. It was to continued>.



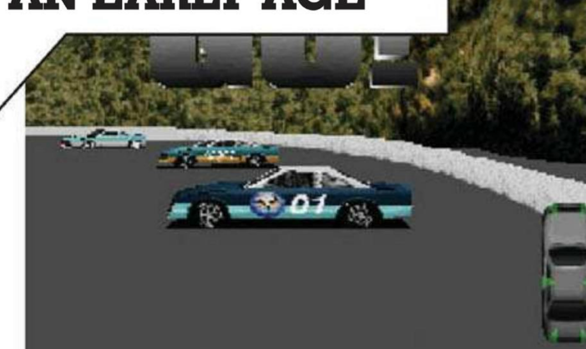
Blistering races could be had on the tightest of tracks, making for a claustrophobic but fun game.

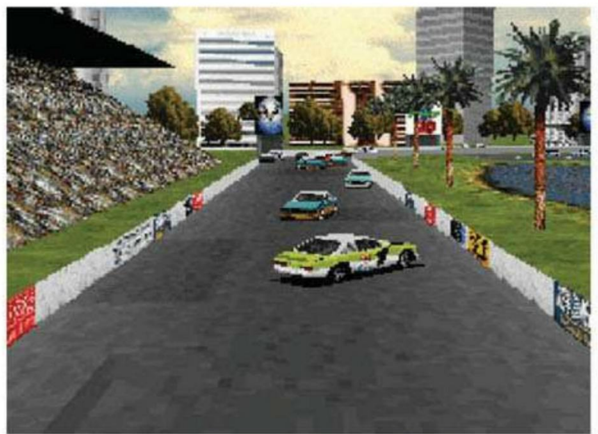






I DEVELOPED A FASCINATION WITH SMASHING UP CARS AT AN EARLY AGE















The key was to crash and crash often, causing some major damage to your opponents.





FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: SNAGGLETOOTH

Destruction Derby was great fun but to me seemed like a rushed job to get out to support the first line of PSone titles. *DD2* to me is the high point of the series. Great fun and it would lend itself well to an HD re-release with online Destruction Bowl and racing.

Posted by: RADIOFLOYD

Destruction Derby Raw was one of my earliest games but I vaguely remember being a bit useless at it. I preferred *Crash Team Racing* and *Speed Freaks.*

Posted by: RAGNAROTH

Destruction Derby 2! That brings back memories. First ever racer and a good racer at that with real damage – such a good feature. Arena mode was excellent. This game is about pure fun. Play it with friends and smash their cars into scrap!!! Brilliant. I'd love to see a new car smash-up with the *Destruction Derby* name.

Posted by: ANDY KUROSAKI

I loved *Destruction Derby 2* because you could smash cars to oblivion. The actual racing I didn't do much of, to be honest. I preferred finding a narrow piece of track, parking sideways so no one could avoid me, then laughing hysterically when all the other AI cars came piling into me, showering parts all over the place. Good times.

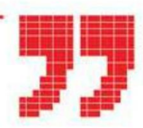






This game succeeds in spite of itself. Glaring faults are forgiven as you bash your way around, the cars denting beyond recognition. Muted applause, please.

Official PlayStation Magazine, Issue 1, November 1995, 7/10



be a fast-moving racer where the effects of the crashes would be seen in dramatic fashion, with bits flying from the unfolding carnage.

"The gameplay was pretty simple and pandered to my simple desire of smashing up cars – there was little else to the game," he said. "It generated enough fun from that basic mechanic and visual to work as a complete game. Having said that, there was certainly a knack and skill to maximising your points: avoiding damage in certain areas, aiming for the rear quarter on other cars to cause spins and so on."

For the game to work, Edmondson, who became responsible for its design, said the physics had to be spot-on. It was a challenge for the four-man programming team of Russell Lazzari, William Musson and brothers Michael and Robert Troughton. "We had 20 cars crashing and banging into each other," says Robert. "It wasn't an easy task to ensure the physics worked well within an arena like that. We had to increase the traction for the artificial intelligence so that the cars could slide around the track. Much of the work went into perfecting this aspect of the game."

The team used Reflections' proprietary engine in order to gain realistic and predictable results. "Well, obviously we were working within the boundaries of what would be called realistic at that time, but to my mind if the physics weren't right it would be nowhere near as satisfying to smash up the cars and, worse, it would be unpredictable and frustrating to play, a bit like a pool game with bad physics," says Edmondson. "The engine was based on a two-dimensional bounding box collision, and pretty early on we had this up and running and would spend hours just smashing cars into each other for the fun of it with no game."

It was this simple demonstration that got everyone at publisher Psygnosis excited about the game. The Reflections team would fire cars into each other, with cinematic cameras watching the action. "This was so much fun that we were lucky we actually finished programming the game," Edmondson laughs.

As well as capturing the imagination of Psygnosis, the technology demo was also pitched to Sony, which didn't believe Reflections could have it finished within the nine-month deadline it had promised. Sony was sceptical about taking the project on for its new machine, but Edmondson was convinced the planned timescale was appropriate. The only issue they seemed to have was the name. "There was a legal problem with *Demolition Derby* for some reason, so I just coined an alternative called *Demolish 'Em Derby*," Edmondson says.

THIS WAS SO MUCH FUN THAT WE WERE LUCKY WE ACTUALLY FINISHED THE GAME

ONE OF THE early decisions was to always view the cars from their exterior, with no interior camera nor any speedometers, gear-shifting or rear-view mirror to worry about. There was a speedo initially, but it was dropped because the cars maxed out at somewhere in the region of 60mph, rendering it irrelevant, and the emphasis was not on speed anyway. "We certainly weren't setting any miles-per-hour records in the game," says Edmondson. All of this also ensured the focus was placed elsewhere.

"I just felt that for this game, with its focus on fast reactions, simple gameplay and the chaos of the destructive action around you, that manual gear changes would be a step too far for most players," Edmondson explains. "The finer technique of driving and maximising performance wasn't really what the game was about either. There was no rear-view mirror because it hampered performance. Remember we had 20 damage-modelled cars in the scene, all the physics going on, and a track that was

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Chase HQ > Destruction Derby > Driver

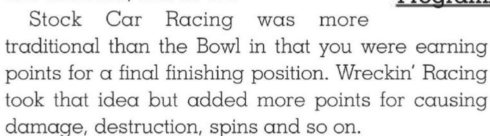


Destroying a villain's car was the order of the day in Taito's classic coin-op, *Chase HQ*, with players being thrilled when it set alight.



Destruction Derby was all about the crashes. The cinematic cameras and angles inspired *Driver*'s Film Director mode.





A nice close-up as a car smashes into the side of the track followed by other motors.

drawn in its entirety. Rear-view mirrors require the whole scene or at least a simplified second version of it to be re-rendered from a new viewport, so it would have absolutely killed the frame rate. Almost halved it, in fact."

The game did have its features, however. Although the premise of each session was similar, the approach to them was different. The Bowl, for instance, would see you compete against 19 others in one major arena. "It caused us problems, though," says Robert. "There were so many cars, collisions and bits flying around and the geometry was complex. It was hard to get the frame rate right, especially if lots of cars hit you at once. We also had to get the cars to drive intelligently when their steering was smashed, when they could only turn in one direction, and so on."



ROBERT TROUGHTON
Programmer

Stock Car Racing was more traditional than the Bowl in that you were earning points for a final finishing position. Wreckin' Racing took that idea but added more points for causing damage, destruction, spins and so on.

"With Wreckin' Racing, you could actually 'win' by coming third or fourth over the line but having earned more points than the first across the line by causing damage," says Edmondson. "This was called spin and roll in the old days of real banger racing and we included it to satisfy different players' moods and the experience they were looking for. If you just wanted a straight race you could have that, for instance."

For all of its chaos, there were some simple AI rules. Strike the rear quarter of a car and it would cause a spin. Reverse ramming a motor would be effective if the damage on the front was dangerously high. "My favourite mode in the Bowl was called 'it', where we had every one of the other 19 cars heading for you," says Edmondson. "Now that was chaos. The one problem I can remember was if all 20 cars effectively collided at once they would try and push through each other's collision boxes and that would also be a big drain on the physics engine."

With two months to go before the nine-month deadline was up, work was progressing well and Sony snapped up the game for its PSone launch. Edmondson felt the name *Demolish 'Em Derby* was more complicated than it needed to be, and because, in America, such motorsports tend to be called destruction derbies, the name was changed again. It became known as *Destruction Derby*.

NOT EVERYTHING IN the game made the cut: a level editor was dropped due to lack of time. "The game was built on an eight-by-eight grid, which didn't give us much estate to play with," says Robert. "We really limited ourselves as to what we could do with the tracks, so small and large corners, crossovers and straights were pretty much it."

But despite the uncharted waters and the time frame, the team enjoyed working on the PlayStation. "It was a really nice machine to program for since it was so simple, relatively speaking, and the tools were pretty good," says Edmondson. "And when you look back, it was nothing like the nightmares that the PS2 and PS3 turned out to be from an ease of programming standpoint. So actually we had things up and running pretty quickly, with the whole game delivered in something like eight admittedly very intensive months from delivery of the dev kits to the game being finished. The speed and the responsiveness was down to a high frame rate of 30Hz and just a pretty responsive – some might say twitchy – driving engine. We had to spend a lot of time on optimisation, actually, to maintain the high frame rate, but this was absolutely vital to the feel of the game and the feeling of satisfaction from the collisions."

The game was well received. **games™** sister magazine **Play** covered *Destruction Derby* in its first issue and awarded it 86%. Lee Buchanan, a reviewer for *PC Gamer*, said the game was "a wild dose of racing madness, with enough wrecks, smoke and squealing tyres to satisfy the demon driver that lurks inside all of us".

None of this surprised Edmondson, whose team went on to make *Destruction Derby 2* (1996), *Destruction Derby 64* (N64, 1999), *Destruction Derby Raw* (PSone, 2000) and *Destruction Derby Arenas* (PS2, 2004). "We had an early idea that the game would be received well since we had demonstrated it in early form to so many people and that was the reaction we were getting," he says. "This was helped, of course, by the buzz around the launch of PlayStation and the fact that the whole experience of fast 3D games were new to many people outside of the arcade. It was still really exciting, though, getting the final game into people's hands and seeing people enjoy it so much, and it's nice to still be answering interview questions about the game after all these years."

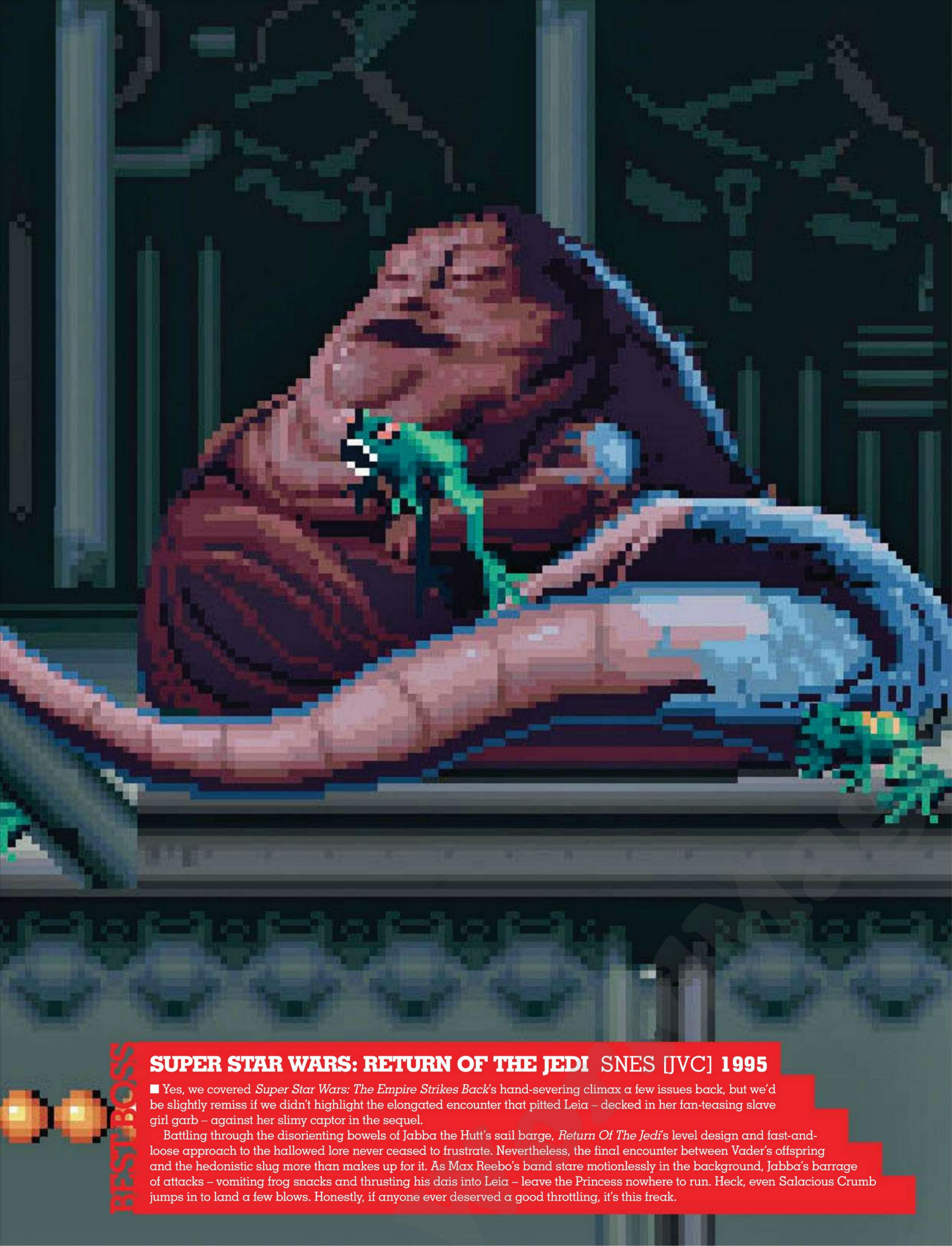
Bumper to bumper

THE ACTION of *Destruction Derby* was made even more frenetic thanks to the claustrophobic nature of the track designs. Edmondson wanted a high density of cars and, given that 20 was the highest comfortable number possible due to the practical limits of the hardware, there had to be a way of ensuring it all ran smoothly. By making the tracks narrow, slippery and bordered with walls, the challenge was set.

"We could avoid scenery popping using our method but really the reason for the tight tracks was to cram the cars together for as much action and destruction as possible," says Edmondson. "I wanted this chaotic and at times almost claustrophobic feeling of being surrounded by that chaos. I also wanted to limit the choice of cars and mechanical options because I felt the game would be better with some very simple presets: tricky, medium and easy, which would give you oversteer, neutral and understeer. And these were early days, remember, so it felt like enough at the time. Three cars and no tuning would be unheard of now, I guess, but back then it kept things simple and delivered a consistent experience for the player. Also remember we had eight or nine months or so to go from dev kit delivery to finished game, so some things we just couldn't even consider."

Martin Edmondson is back at Reflections, now under the Ubisoft banner.


RETRO
BOSS



BEST BOSS

SUPER STAR WARS: RETURN OF THE JEDI SNES [JVC] **1995**

■ Yes, we covered *Super Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*'s hand-severing climax a few issues back, but we'd be slightly remiss if we didn't highlight the elongated encounter that pitted Leia – decked in her fan-teasing slave girl garb – against her slimy captor in the sequel.

Battling through the disorienting bowels of Jabba the Hutt's sail barge, *Return Of The Jedi*'s level design and fast-and-loose approach to the hallowed lore never ceased to frustrate. Nevertheless, the final encounter between Vader's offspring and the hedonistic slug more than makes up for it. As Max Reebo's band stare motionlessly in the background, Jabba's barrage of attacks – vomiting frog snacks and thrusting his dais into Leia – leave the Princess nowhere to run. Heck, even Salacious Crumb jumps in to land a few blows. Honestly, if anyone ever deserved a good throttling, it's this freak.

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Mega Drive
Year: 1991
Publisher: PalSoft
Developer: Technos Japan/PalSoft

DOUBLE DRAGON II: THE REVENGE

ORIGINAL RELEASE Board: Unknown Year: 1988 Publisher: Technos Developer: In-house

THE 8-BIT ports of *Double Dragon II* put up a convincing fight and were widely considered by fans to be an improvement on the many woeful 8-bit ports of *Double Dragon* that had come before them. So when a version for the Mega Drive was announced, many understandably felt the stage was set for the franchise to receive its most faithful port ever seen on a home system. Well, that might have been the case had Technos not handed the conversion job to a small Japanese developer, which turned this hotly anticipated release into something even Master System owners would turn their noses up at.

A series notorious for moving slower than a dismembered sloth's head whenever its action got busy, this port presented the perfect opportunity for PalSoft to finally solve the speed issue that had plagued *Double Dragon*'s action in arcades. However, it seems the coding team thought this was actually some kind of crucial and popular aspect of the franchise, something that if removed would cause the whole experience to come crashing down on the heads of annoyed fans like orange oil drums.

Well, how else can you explain why this port feels so sluggish? You certainly can't lay blame on the machine. It's a 16-bit console, remember, and *Streets Of Rage* which came out in the same year as this conversion, proved the Mega Drive was perfectly capable of delivering a smooth and solid scrolling fighter.

Even if the speed issue was rectified, this still doesn't account for the ropey graphics and muffled sound effects of this port. While certainly not the worst-looking *Double Dragon II* conversion, you'd expect far more in the graphics department from the most powerful console of the time. Not only do the sprites and level graphics look too dark and lack detail, but there's also a nasty black border framing and enhancing their 16-bit ugliness.

Because of these issues, *Double Dragon II* is widely seen as one of the worst arcade conversions to ever grace Sega's 16-bit machine. In fact, there's a rumour that it was so poorly received in Japan that Sega took the decision not to release it outside the territory. The irony, though, is that as a result of this quarantining, this conversion catastrophe has gone on to become a pretty rare and sought-after title among Sega collectors.

HEAD TO HEAD

ARCADE



MEGA DRIVE







THE BREAKDOWN

1 *Double Dragon II* was released in 1988. This conversion was released three years later and on a console that could handle *Double Dragon II* in its sleep. Why, then, does it look so bad? It looks like it was created for the Master System and then ported to the Mega Drive.

2 The other noticeable problem about this conversion is the speed. The fighting is painfully sluggish at times and this has an obstructive effect on hit detection and timing attacks. Beat-'em-ups should feel fast and fluid. If *Streets Of Rage* is Bruce Lee, this is Giant Haystacks.

3 The music isn't that bad, and is probably the closest to a best thing about this port. Shame the muffled sound effects turn up like noise-hating Abobo to ruin things. Is it that difficult to record an effect for a thug dying that doesn't sound like he's spewing into a fish bowl?

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **NES** Year: **1989** Publisher: **Acclaim** Developer: **Technos Japan**



Okay, you got us. It's not really a true port, but it is the best home videogame called *Double Dragon II: The Revenge*. This NES classic looks and plays well and is a great re-imagining of the original. And had we not picked it, we'd have been forced to kick our own butts.

THE COMPLETE HI

YEAR IN 19

1995 WAS a sad year for Nintendo owners, as it marked the end of the NES in America. Massively successful upon its release in October 1985, it built up a huge following stateside thanks to strong third-party support, a host of genuinely great arcade conversions, and stunning RPGs, like the *Final Fantasy* franchise. Nintendo's last official release was the puzzle game *Wario's Woods* in February 1994, while the machine itself, which was looking extremely tired next to the far more powerful Super Nintendo, was cancelled the following year. Amazingly, the NES would last a further eight years in its homeland, with Nintendo officially discontinuing the console in 2003.

1995 may have meant the final passing of Nintendo's 8-bit console for many, but Nintendo certainly wasn't mourning, and it released several new consoles and peripherals throughout the year. By far the most ambitious was Gunpei Yokoi's Virtual Boy, which was released in Japan on 21 July, with the American version arriving on 14 August. The revolutionary console was designed as a tabletop system that displayed stereoscopic 3D graphics. Nintendo had promised in the previous year that its new machine would allow for a more immersive gaming experience. Unfortunately, it was not to be…

The biggest issue with the Virtual Boy was that its red-and-black LED display was nowhere near as immersive as Nintendo had originally claimed. Another more pressing issue was that some gamers would suffer from eyestrain, and in more serious cases, severe headaches when playing. Low third-party support and a lack of innovative titles from Nintendo itself saw the Japanese publisher discontinue the machine on 22 December in Japan, just five months after it was first launched. The American model lasted until 2 March 1996, with creator Yokoi leaving Nintendo several months later on 15 August.

Nintendo's other innovation was the Satellaview, an interesting device for the Super Nintendo, which was essentially a satellite modem. In addition to being able to watch certain TV and radio shows, the device could download games, which covered a wide range of popular franchises, including *F-Zero*, *Harvest Moon* and *The Legend Of Zelda*. The Satellaview was only released in Japan, but was relatively successful, with the service staying online until 30 June 2000.

Although Nintendo continued to have a big presence in 1995, it was Sony and its groundbreaking PlayStation that began to dominate most of the headlines. Sony mania had already gripped Japan, and the same was true

■ Rare followed up *Donkey Kong Country* with a sequel, this time starring Diddy and Dixie Kong. The final part of the trilogy, *Dixie Kong's Double Trouble!*, would arrive the following year.

■ id Software had already raised the bar with *Doom*, but *Duke Nukem 3D* proved that there was still plenty of room in the market for first-person shooters.

■ The Virtual Boy has gone down as an infamous gaming flop, and deservedly so. Seriously, who ever thought it was a good idea?

STORY OF GAMES

in the West upon the system's release. Sony Europe in particular was extremely savvy when it came to the machine's advertising, with popular London nightclubs and other high-profile European locations featuring booths with the likes of *WipEout* playing in them, which struck a chord with the hip and trendy clubgoers of the time. Then there were its unique adverts, which unlike other videogame ads of the time, didn't focus on available games, but instead offered strange, abstract imagery. It was an interesting concept that worked in Sony's favour, with gamers the world over talking about this young upstart, which had seemingly come out of nowhere to make games exciting and cool.

Of course, it also helped that Sony's machine simply had a solid range of impressive-looking games available from launch, and would secure important third-party developers like previous Nintendo bedfellows Capcom and Squaresoft. Sega was still making inroads with its Sega Saturn, but the 32-bit console lacked the breadth and sheer variety of its competitor. Although the Saturn featured its own great games, many gamers were flocking to Sony's machine, which featured amazing demos like a fully 3D Tyrannosaurus, which hinted at the future power of Sony's console. Nothing ever did appear to match the jaw-dropping majesty of that stomping dino – it was just a demo, after all – but it didn't matter. Sony had arrived, and in just a few short years its console would go on to define the generation, a feat repeated by its successor the next time around.

REVIEW 95

Headway was also being made in other areas of the industry, particularly in PC gaming, where 3D graphics were coming along in leaps and bounds thanks to cutting-edge tech in titles such as *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Alien Breed 3D*, *Star Wars: Dark Forces* and Bungie's *Marathon 2: Durandal*. Bungie's game was particularly noteworthy, as, like its predecessor, it proved that strong narrative could be just as compelling in an FPS as cutting-edge visuals. For all the advancements being made in PC hardware, though, it was obvious that 1995 really did belong to Sony and its PlayStation. The gaming landscape had begun to change, and while Nintendo remained the undisputed king of handheld gaming, it was the start of a slippery slope for its home console division. For Sony, on an upward swing, it was just the beginning…

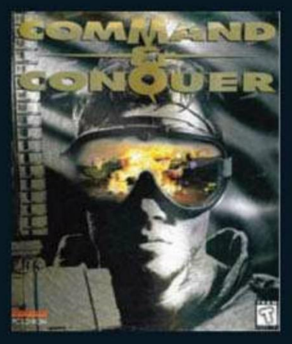
■ Sega's 32-bit console was also launched in Europe and the US in 1995, but it failed to make the same impact as Sony's machine.

■ Ristar is one of Sega's forgotten heroes. Created by Sonic Team, he never gained the same popularity as Sonic, and subsequently never received any sequels.

■ LucasArts continued to challenge the conventions of the adventure game, with *Full Throttle* being another fine effort from the brilliant mind of Tim Schafer.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Michel Ancel

■ Back in 1995, Michel Ancel was a relatively unknown developer, albeit one with imagination and flair to match his development skills. Ancel joined Ubisoft as a graphics artist under the tutelage of Nicolas Choukroun in 1990. It was just two short years later when he became the lead designer on *Rayman*, his beautiful old-school platformer that would eventually receive a release in 1995. While Ancel has dabbled in a number of games since, from original IP (*Beyond Good & Evil*) to film licences (*King Kong*), he remains best known for *Rayman*, and unleashing the infernal Rabbids onto the gaming world.



EXTENDED PLAY: **1995**

COMMAND & CONQUER

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review. This time, we look at Westwood Studios' groundbreaking RTS hit

INTERESTINGLY, LIKE *DOOM* before it, *Command & Conquer* wasn't actually the start of the genre it would go on to dominate. Its gameplay mechanics and refinements were so important, however, that they would be copied by other studios for years to come, and the series itself would become both Westwood's success and its eventual downfall, thanks to the release of the ill-fated *Command & Conquer: Renegade* in 2003.

After finding success with 1992's *Dune II*, Westwood decided to pool all its resources into making a spiritual successor that wouldn't need the help of an existing licence. That pseudo-sequel was *Command & Conquer*, and it massively improved upon every gaming mechanic that had first appeared in its excellent spiritual predecessor. Originally planned as a fantasy game featuring warring wizards, shifts in the economic climate saw the team moving to something based on real life instead. Westwood eventually decided to set the game in an alternate 1995 that became the battleground for two rival factions: the peace-keeping Global Defense Initiative and the malevolent Brotherhood of Nod, who were battling for control of the valuable resource known as Tiberium.

Gameplay-wise, *Command & Conquer* greatly expanded upon the mechanics that were first introduced in *Dune II*. The biggest difference was that you could now select multiple troops by simply holding down the left mouse button and dragging across a selected area, immediately highlighting anything that was found in it. Troops and vehicles could also be controlled with a single click, automatically performing tasks like firing at enemies, rather than forcing players to select them and choose from a variety of different options, like they had to do in *Dune II*. These improvements alone transformed the real-time strategy genre massively, speeding up gameplay and allowing players to make split-second decisions.

C&C MASSIVELY IMPROVED UPON EVERY MECHANIC OF ITS PREDECESSOR

Then there were the factions themselves, which catered for different styles of play and offered over 50 missions between them, and the advanced multiplayer, which supported up to four players and even included a second copy of the game to make matches far easier. The two opposing factions were also exceptionally well balanced, but different enough in their structure that playing them felt like two distinct games. Add in some clever mission design that was as imaginative as it was varied and those iconic live-action FMV sequences, and it was little wonder that Westwood's game went on to top charts and receive numerous ports.



The FMV scenes may have been cheesy, but they did add a certain sense of drama to proceedings.



Like Spice before it, Tiberium was a valuable resource that provided you with the cash for new buildings and troops.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



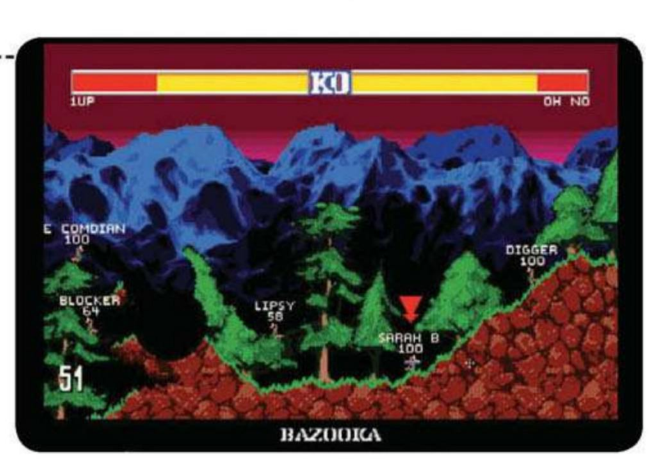
■ THE EFFECT of *Command & Conquer* was huge, with its mouse system alone appearing in virtually every RTS game that came to market. *StarCraft*, *Age Of Empires* and *Company Of Heroes* are just a few games that use the blueprints of Westwood's game, while *C&C* itself spawned an impressive number of sequels and spin-offs, many of which were by Westwood itself. By far the most popular was *Red Alert*, which was set in an alternate Fifties and spawned two sequels and numerous expansions. Sadly, Westwood's most ambitious take on the series, *C&C: Renegade*, proved to be its costliest. It utilised a first-person viewpoint but didn't catch on. It sold poorly, and Westwood's owner, EA, closed down the company. Many Westwood staff members went on to form Petroglyph, which specialises in video and board games, while EA continues to release *C&C* titles, most recently a free-to-play browser game called *Command & Conquer: Tiberium Alliances*.



ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR…

WORMS

■ WE'RE NOT sure who's the bigger genius. *Worms* creator Andy Davidson, or Team17's Martyn Brown, who immediately snapped up Andy's demo and turned it into the company's most valuable franchise. Filled with humour and crazy weapons, it remains a sensational turn-based game that has spawned over 20 sequels and spin-offs.



STAR WARS: DARK FORCES



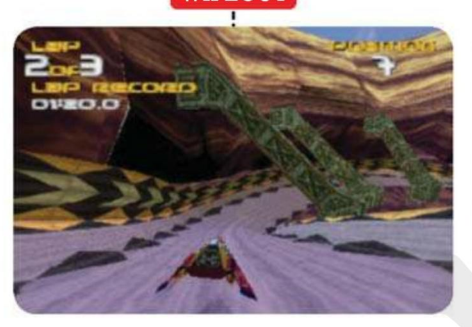
■ LUCASARTS' FIRST in a line of *Star Wars* FPSs appears to be a standard *Doom* clone. It's actually so much more. Story is first and foremost in *Dark Forces*, with Kyle Katarn proving to be an interesting protagonist. Built around the Jedi Engine, it's showing its age a little tech-wise, but it's still a satisfyingly deep blaster.

PANZER DRAGOON



■ SEGA'S IMMERSIVE on-rails shooter certainly confirmed that the Saturn was no slouch when it came to creating fantastic polygonal visuals. Full 360-degree movement around your dragon, stunning boss fights and distinctive art all combined to make it one of the Saturn's earliest hits. It was followed by two incredible sequels.

WIPEOUT



■ SONY WASN'T stupid when it signed up Psygnosis. The Liverpool-based developer's first game for the PlayStation was a mind-blowing debut that not only created a template for all futuristic racers to follow, but helped make Sony's new console appear cool and credible to the masses. Even today, *WipEout* is one of Sony's flagship franchises.

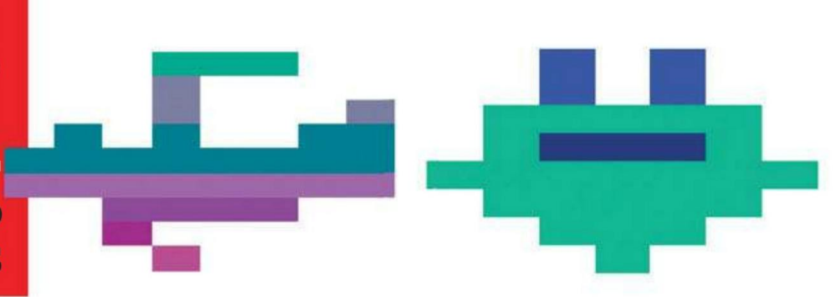
CHRONO TRIGGER



■ SQUARE'S TIME-TRAVELLING RPG is widely regarded as one of the Super Nintendo's best games. It's hard to argue, as it ticks virtually every important box: interesting characters, an engaging and constantly twisting plot, and an excellent combat system. It's received PlayStation, DS and iOS updates in subsequent years.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



AIR RAID

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

DETAILS

FORMAT: Atari 2600
YEAR: 1982
PUBLISHER: Men-A-Vision
DEVELOPER: In-house
EXPECT TO PAY: £2,000 incomplete / £20,000+ complete



EXHIBIT A: *Air Raid* has a unique VCS case with a light blue T-shaped handle. Though other VCS cartridges of this shape were produced, *Air Raid*'s moulding is different to all the rest.



EXHIBIT B: *Air Raid* cartridges alone sell for thousands of dollars, but complete copies have become holy grails for Atari collectors, which is why one sold for a small fortune in 2010.



EXHIBIT C: Many believe *Air Raid* could be a hack of *Space Jockey*. Though similar graphically, *Space Jockey* puts you in the role of the antagonist, and the action is tilted 90 degrees.

Why It's Rare

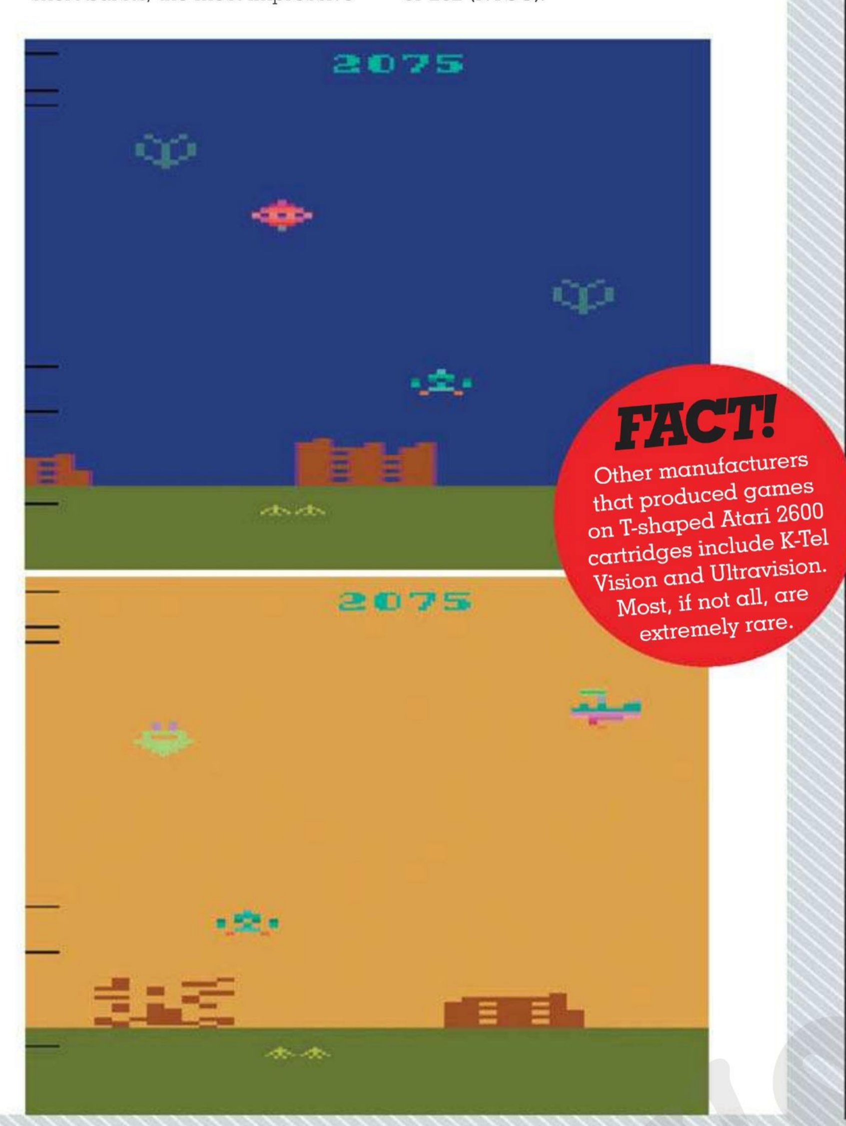
AIR RAID is one of the rarest, most unusual and most expensive games for the Atari 2600. The only release from a little-known US company called Men-A-Vision, it's distinguishable by its unique light blue T-handle design. While other T-shaped 2600 cartridges were produced by other companies, *Air Raid*'s moulding is unique to the rest. Until just a few years ago, very little was known about the history and origin of the game, and many Atari enthusiasts were in debate as to whether it was actually an official North American release or a pirated cartridge. In 2010, however, *Air Raid* hit the headlines when a complete copy sold for a staggering $31,600 on an internet auction site – it cost the seller around $10 as a kid and had been collecting dust in his garage for many years. With a boxed version of the game discovered, *Air Raid*'s developer, as well as its date and location of manufacture, could finally be verified, and as a result it has now been officially inducted into the Atari 2600 NTSC release catalogue. Currently, fewer than 20 copies are known to be in the possession of collectors, making it one of the most challenging games to add to an Atari 2600 collection. Boxed copies, though, are a completely different story altogether, and are truly a holy grail for Atari collectors.





Worth Playing?

IN THE market of game collecting, enjoyment factor seems to have little influence over a game's value, and *Air Raid* is a good example. This basic shooter sees you pilot a skyward-pointing aircraft that can only fire up the screen and move horizontally, and you must shoot enemy bombers as they descend and take aim on a city. Playing like a mixture of *Space Invaders* and *Missile Command*, a life is lost if your ship takes an enemy hit and the game ends if the city sustains too much damage or all your ships get destroyed. Entertaining in short bursts, the most impressive thing about *Air Raid* is its visuals and presentation. The sound effects are nice and crisp, and the skyscrapers you're protecting take gradual damage from enemy fire. But the most interesting thing of all is perhaps the cartridge itself. As well as its peculiar T-shaped design, *Air Raid* shares similar code with another 2600 shooter called *Space Jockey*. This has led some to believe that it could utilise the same engine or even be a hack of the game. *Air Raid* also runs at an unusual resolution, producing 290 lines per frame instead of the standard 312 (PAL) or 262 (NTSC).



FACT!

Other manufacturers that produced games on T-shaped Atari 2600 cartridges include K-Tel Vision and Ultravision. Most, if not all, are extremely rare.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Ian Baronofsky**
Occupation: **Physician**

What is it about *Air Raid* and the Atari 2600 in particular that is attractive to you?
I grew up playing the Atari VCS. When I was a kid, I wanted to get every game I could get for the system. *Air Raid* is one of the hardest games to find for the system, and getting all of the released games is just a continuation of that childhood desire. The best-designed 2600 games do so much with so little. I've always admired how ingenious the game designers were in creating incredibly fun games out of such simple hardware and graphics.

How and where did you find the cart?
I bought it from another collector on the internet who was parting with his collection. I had been waiting to find a reasonable deal on the cartridge since its price exploded in the last ten years. Finding one of these locally would be the score of a lifetime.

What condition was the cart in and how much did you pay for it?
The cartridge is in okay condition with screw holes and typical label 'plaque' – splotchiness of the label related to the adhesive used to attach it to the cartridge. Although I bought it in a lot with some other rarities, I estimate that I paid around $1,600 US for it, which is below market rate. *Air Raid* is one of the most expensive Atari 2600 cartridges out there.

Do you actually play on the cart and, if so, what do you think of it?
I tested the game and it's pretty average. No Atari game could be worth that much money for its play value, much as our memories of certain games may be priceless. The value in *Air Raid* is as a collectable and a bona fide rarity. For VCS collectors who want a complete collection with every released game, *Air Raid* is highly desirable.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the cart or is it yours for life?
As long as I am collecting Atari 2600, I'm keeping this cartridge. Of course, if I have a chance to upgrade to a cartridge in better condition for a reasonable sum, I'd pass this copy along to another collector. Atari 2600 is one of my favourite systems to collect for, and would be the last to go if I had to sell off my collection.

THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

DONKEY KONG

Almost as recognisable and iconic as Mario himself, Donkey Kong has evolved over the years from popular arcade fodder to critically acclaimed platformer. games™ takes a look back at 32 years of the Kong

***Donkey Kong* is legendary.** It's one thing to be recognisable within any medium, but to reach such heights with casual and hardcore gamers alike, not to mention inspire a documentary on the subject, is a level of success that must have surprised even Miyamoto himself. From such humble beginnings as an admired arcade machine, *Donkey Kong* has stayed viable and interesting thanks to its ever-changing template. From embracing the ways of the platformer to trying its hand at rhythm-action, the franchise is nothing if not diverse. Incredibly, the power of the mascot proved it could overcome any challenge, even taking on Mario at his own karting game and, for many, taking the crown. It's been a long journey…






1981

DONKEY KONG

■ DESIGNED BY a young up-and-comer called Shigeru Miyamoto and greenlit due to Nintendo's desire to break into the West, the original *Donkey Kong* was more than just an addictive way to spend your money at the weekend. Toying with visuals and cut-scenes in ways that hadn't been done before in gaming and tying them directly into the plot – a painstakingly simple one, obviously – it also gave birth to Jumpman, aka Mario. Bizarrely, if it wasn't for the relationship between Bluto, Olive Oyl and Popeye, which heavily inspired Miyamoto, *Donkey Kong* may have never existed.



1982

DONKEY KONG JR

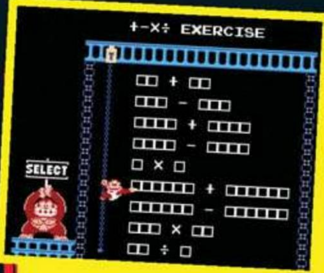
■ BUILDING ON what had made the previous game such a success, *Donkey Kong Jr*'s most interesting dynamic is portraying Mario as a villain. With the giant gorilla caged by the Italian, it's up to his son to try to save him, dodging a similar array of obstacles to those that were introduced a year earlier. The differences came in much faster gameplay, a wider array of ways to get to the top of each screen, the introduction of new enemies, and fiddling with the format so each level was slightly altered.

1983

DONKEY KONG 3

■ DRAMATICALLY TRANSFORMED from its predecessors, *Donkey Kong 3* burst onto the scene with plenty of raised eyebrows in tow. Leaving behind its platforming roots to embrace the ways of a shooter, Stanley – replacing Mario – has to keep Kong away from his greenhouse by blasting him with bullets until he's pushed off the screen. It was far less engaging and enjoyable than the past two entries, a rare occasion where Nintendo's attempt to breathe some life into a franchise didn't go to plan. Repetitive, rigid and not anywhere near as successful, *Donkey Kong 3* remains a flaw on DK's record.





1983

DONKEY KONG JR MATH

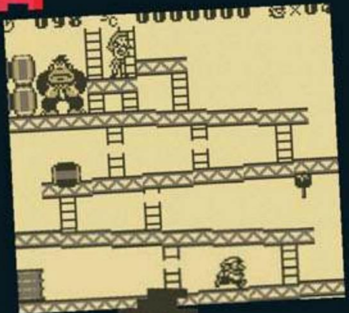
■ RELEASED ON the NES in the midst of *Donkey Kong*'s initial success, Nintendo's desire to release constant content resulted in the edutainment game, *Donkey Kong Jr Math*. It was laughably poor, asking players to traverse a traditional *DK* level, answering mathematically focused questions on the way. Not only was it a nightmare to control – everything felt like a struggle – but it just wasn't very fun, questions being far too easy even for the youngest of gamers. It bombed to such a degree that Nintendo soon changed its mind on the entire genre.



1994

DONKEY KONG

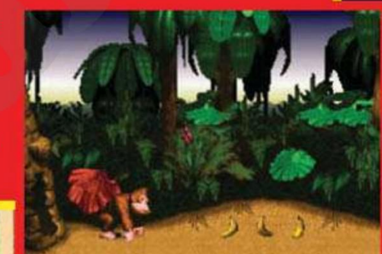
■ NINTENDO MAY have taken its time to get *Donkey Kong* back on the scene, but when it did, it kept things exceptionally simple and, of all things, focused on the Game Boy. Starting with the opening levels from the arcade debut, the game turned into a beast of a portable title with an additional 97 stages. Admittedly there weren't any sweeping changes to be discovered – this was *Donkey Kong* made for on-the-go play – but it did the job in satisfying an insatiable urge that many gamers had developed.



1994

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

■ THE FIRST *Donkey Kong* game not to involve Miyamoto, Rare's *Donkey Kong Country* cemented the franchise's dominance when it debuted on the SNES. Radically evolving the platforming ideals from the Eighties, the side-scrolling *Country* tasked you with the simple aim of recovering DK's bananas, taken from him by the evil Kremlings. As well as constantly toying with the format – Rare took the gorilla swimming, swinging and mine-carting through 40 different levels – Donkey Kong's family was introduced to the public, meaning a second player could take control of a fresh-faced Diddy Kong to roam through the game co-operatively. Rather than just ticks on the back of a box to satisfy marketing execs, it was an experience well-deserving of its praise, inspiring countless copycats and also-rans.



1995

DONKEY KONG LAND

■ CREATED BY Rare and apparently inspired by its success found on the SNES with *Donkey Kong Country*, *Donkey Kong Land* was a watered down version for the Game Boy. Smartly done and only cutting corners where it felt it had to, Rare's spark remained as its latest *DK* outing was fairly charming and warmly received.

1995

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY 2: DIDDY KONG'S QUEST



■ STILL RIDING on the wave of praise from the previous year, Rare returned to the SNES 12 months later with a much-anticipated follow-up. Another Kong, Dixie, was added to the mix, as the returning Diddy and his girlfriend tried to save Donkey from Kaptain K Rool. Diddy and Dixie deliberately played differently from one another in order to give a greater sense of character. Although it was clear this followed in its forerunner's footsteps, the many tweaks and progressive difficulty meant, in record time, Nintendo had another hit on its hands as *Diddy Kong's Quest* went on to sell over 4 million copies.

1996

DONKEY KONG LAND 2



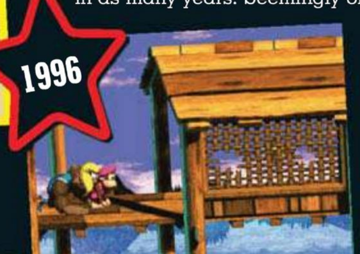
■ RARE CLEARLY realised that it had struck upon a plan that worked, so *Donkey Kong Land 2* once again peeked over at what was happening on the Super Nintendo and tweaked it accordingly for the Game Boy. It may have lacked the scope of its console brother, but it took advantage of the handheld fantastically.

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY 3: DIXIE KONG'S DOUBLE TROUBLE!



■ PROVING THAT today's sequel model isn't actually all that new, 1996 signalled the arrival of the third *Donkey Kong Country* game in as many years. Seemingly obsessed with bizarrely named characters, Rare brought back Dixie along with Kiddy Kong to track down Donkey and Diddy, who had gone missing. Co-op was again pushed to be more dynamic, as was the game's map, enabling you for the first time to go off the beaten path. It ended up with lower scores and sales but capped what is a fantastic trilogy.

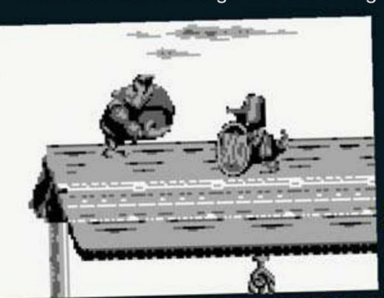
1996



1997

DONKEY KONG LAND III

■ FOLLOWING ON from the approach of the first two, *Donkey Kong Land III* ensured that Rare ended its trilogy of handheld hits on a high too. The straightforward method of shrinking everything down for the small screen returned, and it's a testament to the developer that it managed to make this work on both the home and portable consoles.



DIDDY KONG RACING

1997

■ SEEMINGLY HAPPY with forgoing sleep, Rare shocked the world in 1997 when *Diddy Kong Racing* arrived. Not only did it sacrifice the franchise's lead in favour of his nephew, but the choice of genre put it in direct competition with *Mario Kart*, a game often intimated but never bettered. Imagine everyone's surprise, then, when *Diddy Kong Racing* was good, and pinched Mario's crown off his head. Brilliantly building a hub world into an oddly entertaining narrative, it even boasted boss races and took you into the skies and water.



GAME & WATCH

Behold the king…



Donkey Kong

Released: **1982**

■ A port of the arcade game, although a much more simplified one, that took place across the Game & Watch's two screens. The twist came with, of all things, a set of pegs. Once unhooked, Donkey Kong fell to his demise.

Donkey Kong Jr

Released: **1982**

■ Much like *Donkey Kong*, Nintendo simply took the idea of *DK Jr* and found a way to make it work on the Game & Watch. Sticking with the same storyline as the coin-op, it made a comeback in 1998 as a part of the Mini-Classics series.

1999

DONKEY KONG 64



■ CONTROVERSIAL FROM the off as it had the dubious task of being the first game to require the N64 Expansion Pak, *Donkey Kong 64* took the concepts that had made the SNES entries so popular and tried to repackage them on Nintendo's new console. Realising how well *Mario 64* had been received, Rare put its unique stamp on the game thanks to an enlarged pool of characters, with five Kongs to choose from. As each had their own set of moves, abilities and collectables, *DK64* had a staggering amount of replayability, not to mention a multiplayer mode. While the latter was a little hit and miss, it was yet another hit from Rare.

2003

DONKEY KONGA

■ THERE ARE some truly obscure titles on the GameCube, *Donkey Konga* being one of them. Despite finding its fair share of popularity, a rhythm-action game co-developed by Namco was surely an entry no one could have predicted when the gorilla debuted back in the early Eighties. Packaged with two bongo controllers, enabling you to smack each in time with the music, the absurdity of the project continued with the track listing, the likes of Queen's *We Will Rock You* happily sitting alongside the theme from *Zelda*. Despite all this madness, *Donkey Konga* was a pleasure, even picking up an award for innovation along the way.



2004

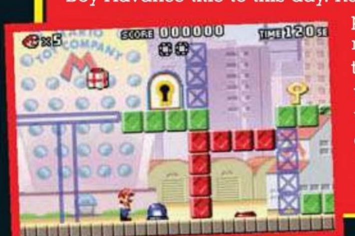
DONKEY KONGA 2

■ NINTENDO SENSED a need to unleash more bongo-hitting joy into people's lives, so 2004 saw a *Donkey Konga* sequel released to little fanfare. Retaining all the elements of before, its only real reason for existing was to offer more tracks, proof that there was a time when DLC was not the all-encompassing monster it is today.

2004

MARIO VS DONKEY KONG

■ TAKING THE elements that had brought them both into the public eye and then throwing some puzzle elements in means *Mario vs Donkey Kong* remains an intriguing Game Boy Advance title to this day. Rather than avoiding barrels, the plumber had to avoid a number of more free-flowing obstacles in order to get his hands on a specific item, the collecting of which would then unlock the next. It was a natural evolution of the *DK* concept, but it wasn't until 2006 when this became something so much more…





2005

DK: KING OF SWING

■ THIS DIVISIVE entry in *Donkey Kong*'s legacy almost seemed like Nintendo's attempt to recapture the simple and intuitive nature that brought the series to prominence in the first place. In many ways, this was achieved, with Donkey Kong being asked to swing around specific pegs in order to get to his goal as numerous obstructions threatened to derail our hero. It was fine but heavily overlooked: when was the last time you heard anyone mention it?



2005

DONKEY KONG: JUNGLE BEAT

■ REALISING THAT letting the bongo controllers simply die was not an option, Nintendo found a way to take them and adapt the concept into a platformer. Hammering the left and right drum would move Donkey Kong, a swift smack of both seeing him jump into the air. It resulted in a unique and compelling experience, polished off excellently with a layer of depth that revealed further secrets the more you experimented. It more recently bounced back into view thanks to a Wii release.





Donkey Kong II

Released: **1983**

■ With the limitations of the hardware making it difficult to do anything intricate, *Donkey Kong II* was forced to be basic, in this case getting DK Jr to use a key to unlock four different chains that held the now-famous gorilla hostage.

Donkey Kong Circus

Released: **1984**

■ One of the few Game & Watch titles to feature full colour. *Donkey Kong Circus*, once again, experimented in bizarre ways. As DK dances on a barrel while Mario watches, the gorilla has to juggle pineapples by skipping across the screen.

Donkey Kong Hockey

Released: **1984**

■ Nintendo, in 1984, decided the best way for Mario and Donkey Kong to settle their differences was over a game of hockey. The real twist was multiplayer play thanks to two controllers hidden in the back of the hardware itself.

2005

DONKEY KONG: JUNGLE FEVER

■ FOR ONE of the latest *Donkey Kong* games to be released in the arcades, Nintendo relinquished control over to Capcom and a successor to the GameCube's *Jungle Beat* was born. In the same vein as the insanely popular pachinko games, it's the only *Donkey Kong* game to use a medal-based system. Borrowing many of the same mechanics as the 2004 release, it never saw release outside Japan.



2005

DONKEY KONGA 3: TABE-HOUDAI! HARU MOGITATE 50 KYOKU

■ THIS JAPAN-ONLY third *Donkey Konga* game once again kept its basics intact, instead focusing on its song list, which consisted of 57 tracks. Its spice came in the form of 21 tunes from the NES.



2006

MARIO VS DONKEY KONG 2: MARCH OF THE MINIS

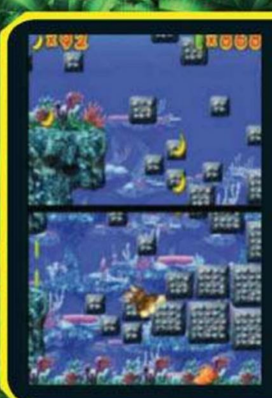
■ THIS SEQUEL to the 2004 original is, for many, the true standout of this spin-off series thanks to its ingenious use of the DS touch screen and *Lemmings*-inspired ways. With the simple goal of getting a group of mini, robotic Marios to the end of the level, the puzzles put in place require such patience and expert timing that even the most hardened gamer will appreciate the challenge. An underrated gem.



2006

DONKEY KONG: BANANA KINGDOM

■ RESIDING IN Japan only and another addition to the *Donkey Kong: Jungle Fever* line. Capcom stuck strictly to its formula, iterating rather than changing what it clearly deemed to be a winning idea. Don't expect to see this in the West any time soon.





2007

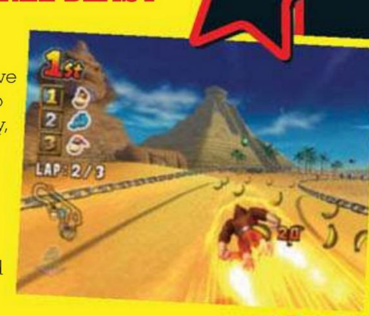
DK: JUNGLE CLIMBER

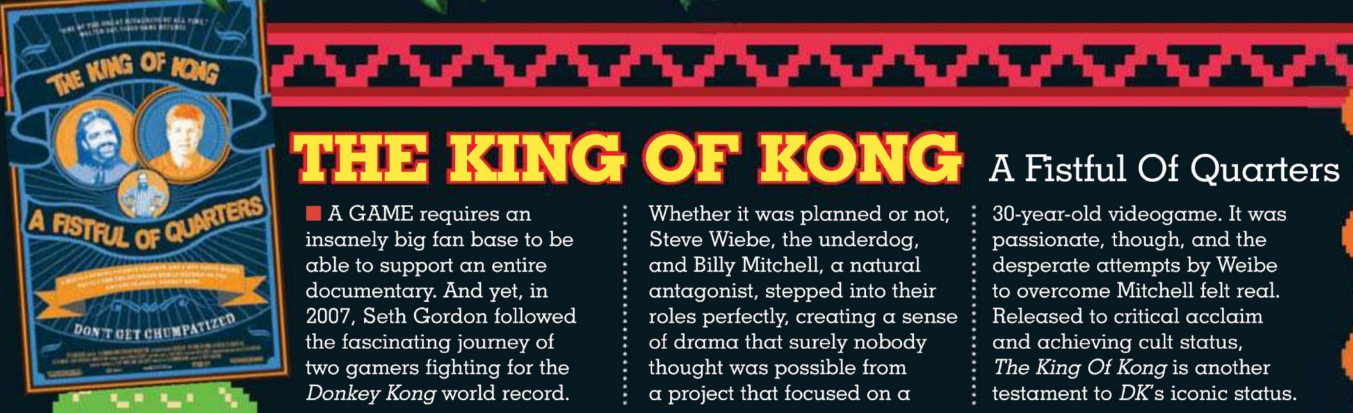
■ THIS SEQUEL to *DK: King Of Swing* was never going to light up the planet, and the DS's *Jungle Climber* was a disappointment, mostly due to it essentially reworking the idea. While this version was far superior, the peg-based gameplay had lost some of its charm in the three-year interim period, leaving this in the unenviable position of feeling too light to deserve its full-priced outing.

2007

DONKEY KONG: BARREL BLAST

■ ORIGINALLY DESIGNED for the GameCube, *Barrel Blast* was held off in favour of a Wii release, a move that signalled the end of the bongo peripheral's lifespan. Unfortunately, the Wii Remote and Nunchuk proved to be a poor substitute. Relying on many of the staples that *Mario Kart* had for years, the racing game was a draining experience as both controllers had to be constantly shaken.





THE KING OF KONG A Fistful Of Quarters

■ A GAME requires an insanely big fan base to be able to support an entire documentary. And yet, in 2007, Seth Gordon followed the fascinating journey of two gamers fighting for the *Donkey Kong* world record. Whether it was planned or not, Steve Wiebe, the underdog, and Billy Mitchell, a natural antagonist, stepped into their roles perfectly, creating a sense of drama that surely nobody thought was possible from a project that focused on a 30-year-old videogame. It was passionate, though, and the desperate attempts by Weibe to overcome Mitchell felt real. Released to critical acclaim and achieving cult status, *The King Of Kong* is another testament to *DK*'s iconic status.



2007

DIDDY KONG RACING DS

■ A RETURN to the much-loved racing format should have been a momentous occasion in all of videogames but, alas, the DS version of *Diddy Kong Racing* didn't turn out as many had hoped. Although the races, much like a decade ago, were varied and fun with a more than decent online mode, Rare's decision to try to work in the DS's touch screen as much as possible was a poor one that watered down the experience no end.

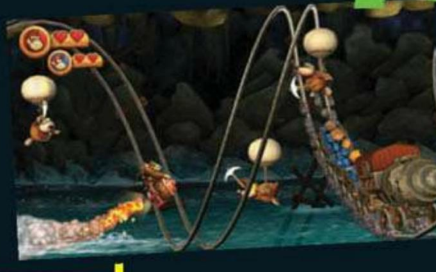


2009

MARIO VS DONKEY KONG: MINIS MARCH AGAIN!



■ PUTTING ASIDE the awful title, *Minis March Again!* is a testament to Nintendo DSiWare. Keeping the foundations alive, the sole reason to download this iteration was for the very well-constructed level editor. By opening up the option to both play locally and share across the internet, anyone who had bought into the concept all of a sudden had hundreds more stages to get completely lost in.



2010

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS

■ RARE MAY have left Nintendo and gone to Microsoft years prior, but if anyone could fill the gap it was Retro Studios. Having already showcased its talents with *Metroid Prime*, Retro ensured its reputation was left where it belongs. Reverting to the platforming traditions that had made it such a success in the mid-Nineties, Donkey, Diddy, mine carts, vines and bananas all returned. It was designed that way too, with Miyamoto desperate to evoke nostalgic feelings within its players.

2010

MARIO VS DONKEY KONG: MINI-LAND MAYHEM!



■ THIS LOW-KEY sequel is a confusing entry in the *Donkey Kong* canon. With its community given the opportunity to create its own levels only a year earlier, *Mayhem* felt slightly redundant, saved because of the gulf in skill between someone in their bedroom and Nintendo. Trust us: it's a huge gap.

DONKEY GONE

The Donkey Kong games that never made it to market

Diddy Kong Pilot

Last seen: **2001**



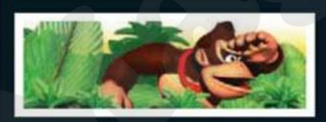
■ SHOWCASED AT Space World 2001, *Diddy Kong Pilot* was meant to be a spiritual sequel to *Diddy Kong Racing* the focus, naturally, being on flying rather than ground and water competition. Nintendo, however, felt it was sub-par and cancelled the project. It would eventually come to pass in another guise when, in 2005, *Banjo-Pilot* was released on the Game Boy Advance.

Donkey Kong Racing

Last seen: **2001**



■ GIVEN *Diddy Kong Racing*'s popularity, it's little surprise that Rare had a sequel in the works. Also shown off at Space World 2001, many similarities with its predecessor were revealed. Unfortunately, while it was in development, Microsoft purchased Rare, ending the project.



Donkey Kong: Coconut Crackers

Last seen: **2002**

■ ORIGINALLY A puzzle game designed for the GBA by Rare, it was languishing in development obscurity until being quietly cancelled in 2002 when Microsoft made its most famous purchase. Some say the 2004 game *It's Mr Pants* was created from the ashes of the project.

ESSENTIALS

10 OF GAMING'S BIGGEST LOSERS

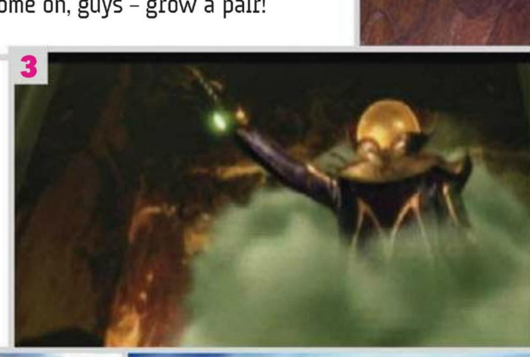
■ Videogames have seen no shortage of gallant warriors, patriotic knuckleheads and white knights with an unflinching willingness to put their life on the line. And then there are the other guys. Those who turn away at the first sign of trouble; who recoil at the cacophony of war; who can't take a slap without crumbling into a fit of tears. You'd feel sorry for this band of wimps, if it wasn't for the fact that they're so pathetic. Come on, guys – grow a pair!

4



1

3



2





5

6



Magikarp
Game: Pokémon
Year: 1996

1 By anyone's standards, this aquatic vertebrate would be considered the booby prize of any backwater carnival game. Nevertheless, it became a must-have for any Pokédex purely because it evolves into the infinitely superior Gyarados at level 20. Until then, Magikarp flops hopelessly with its zero-damage Splash move until it slithers back inside its Pokéball. It remains a pathetic excuse for a Pokémon that, if we had our way, would be flushed straight down the toilet at the earliest opportunity.

Iron Golem
Game: Dark Souls
Year: 2011

2 Among *Dark Souls'* bloodcurdling rogues' gallery, you won't find an enemy more physically imposing than the Iron Golem. Standing ominously at the very peak of Sen's Fortress, players approaching this giant metallic monster anxiously prepare themselves for a battle that's sure to be of gargantuan proportions. Well, guess again. A few swift jabs to the goliath's ankles and the rusty rascal crashes down to the ground like a house of cards. Players send this guy back to the scrap heap in a matter of minutes, proclaiming him *Dark Souls'* biggest wiener.

Mysterio
Game: Spider-Man 2
Year: 2004

3 Residing on the lower echelons of Spider-Man's colourful most wanted list, Mysterio is the least intimidating of the criminal masterminds stinking up the streets of the Big Apple. Nevertheless, Peter Parker's alter ego finds the illusionist during some petty dime-store bust in sunny Manhattan. Ever the showman, Mysterio makes a commanding entrance, declaring his ultimate strength as his health meter soars preceding the battle, suggesting another tough fist fight between Spidey and the colourful villain. One punch to the face later and Quentin Beck collapses to the floor, whimpering. Nice work, fishbowl head.

Ramon Salazar
Game: Resident Evil 4
Year: 2005

4 It's bizarre that a little Spanish Napoleon with anger issues interrupts the halfway point of *Resident Evil 4*. You don't have to stare too long at Ramon Salazar to realise he's the most ridiculous antagonist to ever trouble a *Resi* hero, but the squeaky-voiced castellan has filled his madhouse with myriad deathtraps to try to ensnare the intrepid Leon Kennedy. It's fair to say that the pint-sized megalomaniac doesn't stand a chance going toe-to-toe with Kennedy, choosing instead to combine with some evil vegetation in a futile effort to best Raccoon City's brightest. Turns out plants aren't very good at resisting bullets.

Jigglypuff
Game: Super Smash Bros
Year: 1999

5 It's a fact that Jigglypuff is the weakest of the original *Super Smash Bros* roster. The little pink puffball – well, the other little pink puffball – gets kicked around the screen by the other fighters and hurled into oblivion as the sweet screams of her name echo in players' ears. And not only is the wide-eyed Pokémon pitifully weak, but her move set is utterly useless. Sure, if you connect 'Rest' just right it'll send the opponent skyward, but if you miss, Jigglypuff will have a little nap while other players kick the crap out of her. Oh, Jigglypuff. You really weren't cut out for the ring.









Skull Kid
Game: Zelda: Ocarina Of Time/ Majora's Mask **Year:** 1998/2000

6 This creepy fellow slinks around the Lost Woods, and while Link can befriend Skull Kid as a child, the antisocial little flutist will scurry away at the first sign of trouble – or an adult. In *Majora's Mask*, where he was promoted to primary antagonist, the eponymous mask acted as a vessel for all of the impertinent imp's frustrations and rage. Without the mask he is nothing but a susceptible emo-type who'd rather languish in the woods alone than help Link on his quest. He probably likes My Chemical Romance.

Dan Hibiki
Game: Street Fighter IV
Year: 2008

7 Dan is regarded as something of a joke character throughout the *Street Fighter* franchise and, well, the cocksure brute doesn't exactly do himself any favours. Speaking just in gameplay terms, he was always one of the weakest, of the early line-up – used primarily to taunt opponents and catch them off guard with a series of wacky moves. His bumbling, comical mannerisms are laughable, and the dude spends as much time in the arena crying about his father as he does socking people in the face. This loser can't even pay his phone bill on time!

Bob The Goldfish
Game: Earthworm Jim 2
Year: 1995

8 We don't know what it is about enemies that reside in fishbowls, but they are almost always assured to be the feeblest villains imaginable. Bob The Goldfish doesn't even talk the talk, let alone walk the… uh, swim. It's all in the eyes, though, and Bob at least has steely determination behind those bulbous peepers. And you never know; after Jim plucks the boss from his glass home and swallows him, Bob may just give our hero a nasty case of mercury poisoning.

Glass Joe
Game: Punch-Out!!
Year: 1984

9 This fragile boxer hailing from Paris has an astonishingly appalling track record to date. With only one win against 99 losses, it's about time that ol' Glass Joe hangs up his gloves for good. Yeah, he's a crude national stereotype, but his cowardice and glass jaw made him a firm fan favourite over the years. He most recently made a triumphant return in *Punch-Out!!* for the Wii, wherein the doctor had prescribed him protective headgear to guard his frail chops. Keep fighting the good fight, Joe!

Negative Man
Game: Mother 3
Year: 2006

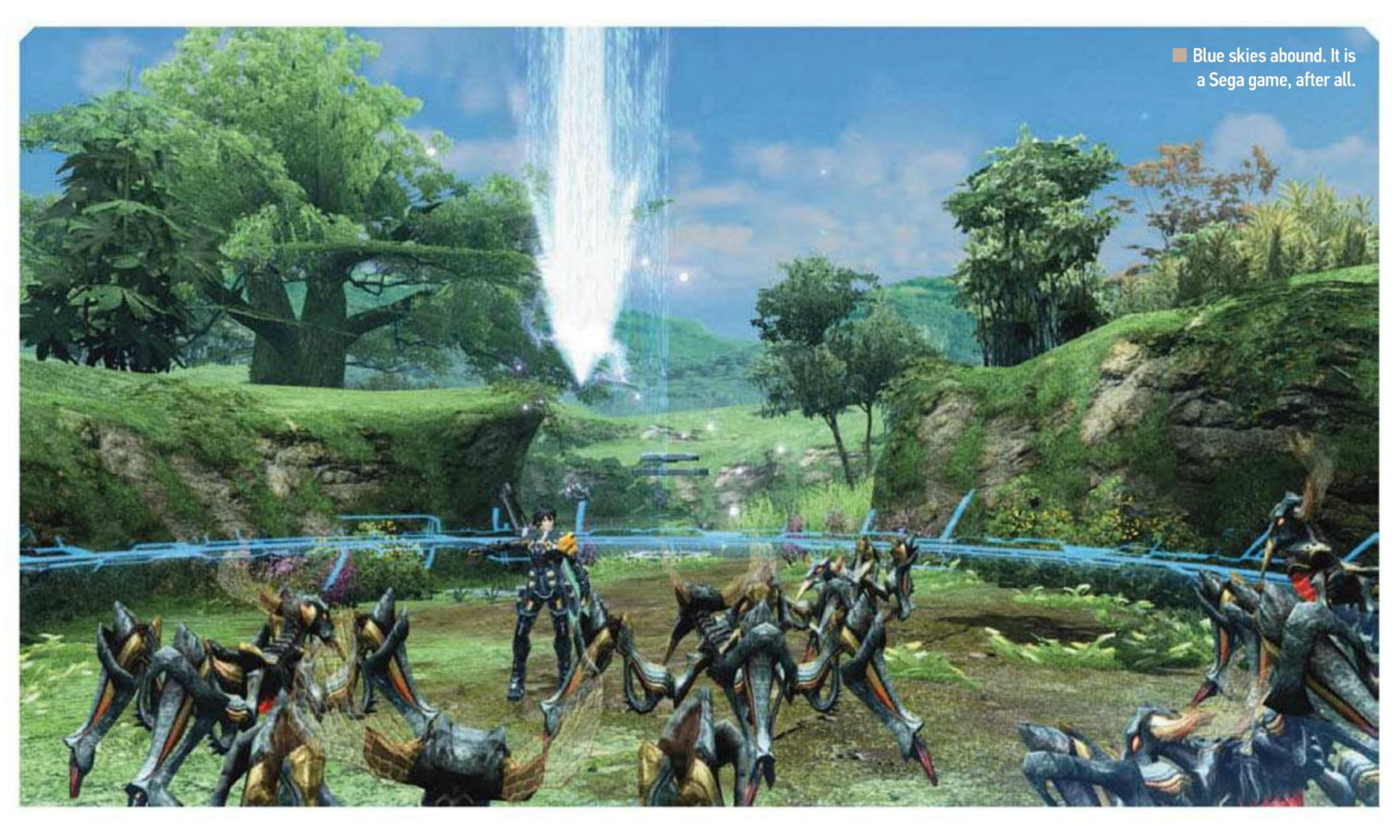
10 There's never been an enemy in videogames that has made you feel more guilty for beating on them than poor Negative Man. When you reach this urine-coloured cousin of SpongeBob, he's already on his knees, bawling about how there's no chance he can defeat you. It's not enough to deter Lucas and his gang, who continue to kick the weeping man when he's down. As the pummelling goes on, Negative Man barely retaliates, incessantly wailing until the moment he begs for the sweet, merciful release of death. Lucas' party inevitably obliges and look like the cruellest bullies in the process. These guys are the worst.



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MARVEL
HEROES
CAN THE MIGHTY MARVEL COMICS FINALLY CONQUER THE MMO?



Blue skies abound. It is a Sega game, after all.

Phantasy Star Online 2

SEGA'S SUCCESSOR TO THE ORIGINAL PSO IS MAKING ITS WAY WEST IN 2013. GAMES™ INVESTIGATES THE NEXT STEP IN THE INTERGALACTIC SAGA

There's little doubt that *Phantasy Star Online* was ahead of its time. While the commercial marketplace may have largely overlooked the game itself, the idea that players could interact with each other in a pervasive and persistent online world was simply unheard of when the game appeared on the Dreamcast over a decade ago.

Sega at its most pioneering presented a prescient understanding of how console gaming would radically evolve in the ensuing years, and it would declare this progression with *PSO*. Abridging many of the mechanics prolific in popular PC MMOs, *PSO* presented a lightning-fast online multiplayer experience that felt like a revolution, all within the constraints of a 56K modem.

To coincide with the ten-year anniversary celebrations of the original title, Sega has announced that *Phantasy Star Online 2* will be making its way to the US and Europe in early 2013, with the game already available in Japan. And it looks to once again be innovating in terms of how it connects players, as *PSO2* will be available on PC, Vita, iOS and Android as a free-to-play title.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC, PS Vita, Mobile
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: In-house
ORIGIN: Japan



Moving the game to handheld devices and embracing the free-to-play subscription model almost mirrors the choices made with the first *PSO*. It's with a perceptive glance at the industry that Sega understands the fact that a *PSO* sequel would only work as a free-to-play venture. The genre has changed massively in the last decade, and when even the most high-profile MMO release to arrive in the West in the last few years, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, is currently haemorrhaging subscriptions and subsequently acquiescing to demands that it adopt a form of free-to-play access, there's little hope for a revived licence that simply doesn't carry the same heft as it once did.

LIKEWISE, THE CHOICE of shifting onto mobile devices nails the gaming zeitgeist directly on the head. As demand increases for console experiences on mobile platforms, having an MMO as comprehensive as *PSO2* accessible in portable form is likely to appeal to Western gamers as much as its native audience.

Of course, the promise of diverse platforms and a tactically sound subscription model carry little credence unless at the forefront is a similarly progressive attitude to the gameplay. The original *Phantasy Star Online* and its follow-ups contained a world deeply entrenched in mythology that was bolstered by dynamic game mechanics. Founded on gameplay principles inspired by the original *Diablo*, Sonic Team implemented a four-player team element into *PSO* that would later influence the ubiquitous *Monster Hunter* franchise.

A lot of these fundamentals translate to the sequel. Four-player co-op is still the acute focus, but Sega has also sought to include a more comprehensive single-player experience for players who desire to wander freely across the various planets. There's a class system in place, but it's relatively streamlined compared to the often complex and convoluted species and class types found in *Final Fantasy XI* and *EverQuest II*. Alongside a new character creator – which Sega touts as hugely advanced, enabling players to change the size and shape of individual body parts – experimenting with different classes is strongly encouraged, with class-based levelling at the player's behest.



Fond memories of the hugely impressive dragon boss in *PSO* leave us excited at what more powerful hardware will make possible in *PSO2*.

Like the original, the new game is likely to have a more comprehensive combat system than your average MMO.

> "Phantasy Star Online 2 will be investing as much time in mixing up the formula as it does servicing nostalgia"





The fantasy meets sci-fi art style will look familiar to people who spent chunks of their life aboard *PSO*'s Pioneer 2.

Dungeons and enemy encounters are completely randomised, ensuring that each time you log on to the server, you can expect surprises across familiar terrain. It's an idea that the genre has been using for some time, but the question is whether Sega will try to innovate on this concept. The publisher has stated that missions may be interrupted with random challenges that will test players' perseverance, skills and teamwork, so it's a strong indication that *PSO2* will be investing as much time in mixing up the formula as it does servicing nostalgia.

ARK LIFE

While Sega has yet to detail the specifics of how this model will work within *Phantasy Star Online 2*, the Japanese release gives a clear view of how the in-game purchases will work within the game. Players are part of organisations known as Arks, which make up a group of spaceships called the Oracle Fleet, and it's this corporation's money that will act as the in-game currency. 'Arks Cash' is purchased and used for various battle enhancements within the game. *PSO2* hasn't placed a heavy emphasis on in-game purchases as yet, but expect more real-money content of various degrees of importance to appear once the game emerges outside Japan.

"The number one thing we want to provide players in *Phantasy Star Online 2* is an adventure that changes every time they log in," explains producer Satoshi Sakai of Sega Japan, on the decision to include randomised elements. "Just as great tabletop RPG experiences revolve around imaginative and unexpected encounters, we want players to consistently be surprised as they explore dungeons and undertake quests."

It's clear, though, that the key to *PSO2* will be customisation. With the aforementioned modifications available to character design and classes, alongside the ability to tweak individual weapon combos – not to mention the likelihood of a swath of aesthetic adjustments to characters available later in the game – Sega has made this new chapter of *Phantasy Star Online* one based on choice. It's a certainty that Sega has made the right decision in adopting the free-to-play model, but it's whether it can find the right balance between valid gameplay extensions and intrusive tolls on enjoyment that will determine the continued success of the franchise. It's a perilous tightrope, but we're confident that Sega will succeed.

MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: RIDERS OF ROHAN INBOUND



The Lord Of The Rings Online's biggest update since the MMO launched is nearing. As the Fellowship trundle forward towards Mount Doom at a pace that makes the bloated denouements of *Return Of The King* look lightning-fast, the *Riders Of Rohan* patch introduces mounted combat, an increase in the level cap, and the land of Rohan to explore, which should help Frodo on his way.

PANDARIA RELEASE DATE ANNOUNCED



Blizzard has announced the release date for the eagerly anticipated new *WOW* update. On sale from 25 September, the *Mists Of Pandaria* expansion pack will come in three flavours, with standard, deluxe and collector's editions. The latter boxset will hold a particular appeal to those with a penchant for evocative imagery of humanoid pandas.

ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE MMO ANNOUNCED



Arktos Entertainment and Hammerpoint Interactive have announced *The War Z*, set in a post-apocalyptic Earth where a zombie outbreak has ravaged the planet. The feature to pique our interest is the choice of a normal and hardcore mode, the latter of which will feature permadeath.

THE OLD REPUBLIC REVEALS FAMILIAR ROBO-COMPANION



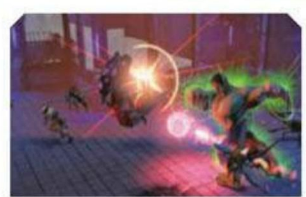
Fans of sardonic AI may rejoice, as BioWare has announced the arrival of a new companion in the form of the HK-51 assassination droid for *The Old Republic*. The bot will be familiar for fans of *Knights Of The Old Republic*'s HK-47.



The prospect of huge public battles against enemies like Sentinels is an exciting one that Marvel fans have dreamt of for years.



While Gazillion isn't divulging details yet, hero characters' powers will be levelled up by a points system, becoming ever more impressive.





The costume and loot drop system will be a big part of what drives character customisation in *Marvel Heroes*, with drops colour-coded for rarity and effectiveness.

Marvel Heroes

IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!

Everything is coming up aces for Marvel Comics right now. It's now not only a geek culture and comic book mainstay but a mainstream one after finally conquering Hollywood with the *Avengers* movie. So it was only a matter of time before a Marvel MMO appeared – Marvel wasn't going to let the 'Distinguished Competition' get a march on it with *DC Universe Online* forever. But Marvel and developer Gazillion Entertainment appear to have learnt a thing or two from *DC Universe*'s struggles in the changing MMO space.

Unlike *DC Universe Online*, which started off subscription-based and reverted to free-to-play after seven months, *Marvel Heroes* is starting that way. That, Gazillion believes, will give it wider appeal and a good casual/hardcore player mix at launch. *Marvel Heroes*' entire gameplay ethos is also radically different. Rather than, as *DC Universe* does, having players creating their own heroes, with the likes of Superman as quest givers, *Marvel Heroes* will let them play as classic characters like Iron Man, Spider-Man and the Hulk, just to name a few. While contrary to most MMOs' focus on unique character creation, it does tap into the majority of gamers' superhero fantasies. After all, why create a character like Wolverine when you can play as the rage-driven mutant himself? That's arguably where *DC Universe Online* stumbled, and to ensure variety, *Marvel Heroes* players will have a number of characters from across the Marvel universe that they can switch between.

/// **Gazillion Entertainment** is making gameplay just as accessible, with an isometric view and control scheme lifted straight out of *Diablo* – *Diablo* creator David Brevik is the game's lead designer – allowing for a crossover of mechanics from the dungeon-crawler and MMO genres. Players will pick their Marvel characters, each of which has their recognisable powers divided into types – the Hulk, for example, is a strength/melee-based character, while Iron Man is in the energy/ranged class – and their active and passive powers reflect that. Your base powers, which will have a dedicated levelling system, aren't the only source of abilities; *Diablo*-style loot drops of costumes and powers promise to make characters play very differently depending on what's equipped during play. It's these sorts of things that will fuel the in-game purchases that fund *Marvel Heroes*.

While all of the game's 'towns' or quest hubs, like the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning, will be non-instanced zones, it'll use randomly generated semi-instanced areas for combat, private instanced ones for boss battles against the likes of Magneto, and big public missions with massive enemies like Sentinels. It's all tied together by a more story-driven approach than most MMOs as players follow a fairly linear tale penned by popular Marvel scribe Brian Michael Bendis, which has them battling to save the world from Doctor Doom.

It's always hard to balance any MMO right to ensure a wider appeal, but *Marvel Heroes*' accessible gameplay, an almost single-player narrative approach, and the current popularity of Marvel's heroes could be more than enough to crack it.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: Gazillion Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: 2012
PRICE: Free






ASUS



GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Mark Ogilvie

Lead designer, RuneScape

After a decade in the sun, RuneScape introduces the most significant update in the free-to-play MMO's history. Discussing the Evolution Of Combat patch, lead designer Mark Ogilvie addresses RuneScape's success, free-to-play and the future of the MMO

How surprising have you found the level of interest for *Evolution Of Combat*?
Its always quite humbling how passionate and interested the players are in our game! However, a change as significant as *Evolution Of Combat* was always going to spark a huge amount of debate. We're just pleased we had the opportunity to offer it as a beta rather than as an ordinary update to the live game. We weren't sure just how interested people would be in beta access, but we were getting thousands of signups every minute when we announced it and [crashed] our servers.

What's the secret to securing longevity in an increasingly congested and competitive MMO genre?
Find your niche and own it. Don't be afraid to innovate to stay competitive, but not at the expense of your core community or gameplay.

What are the mistakes that other free-to-play MMOs make?
There are plenty of classic mistakes made by games that have added a freemium mode after creation, the biggest being overestimating the average user's attention span. If you're an MMO going free, you probably need to simplify your early gameplay. If we assume a free player has a more casual relationship with the product than a subscriber since they have invested only time, rather than time and money, don't ask them to adopt complex play styles or fathom difficult principles. Players of free games tend to do so with far less commitment, and are more likely to be switching between the game and other activities at the same time.

***RuneScape* has faced criticism for its high numbers of bots. How do you go about policing the game?**
We've always taken a very strong stance against those who seek to destroy the balance and fairness of our game, but it's a tough war to fight. In the past, we have taken dramatic steps to remove gameplay that offered unbalanced trading [...] but, ultimately, changes of that magnitude often affect legitimate gameplay. After all, you want to allow players to gift items, or to use our brutal, adrenaline-pumping, risk-heavy PvP system. Back in October we released several updates to attack certain types of bots, making them impossible to use. We're not afraid of taking the fight onto different levels too, and have already taken bot-makers to court – and won.

> If you're an MMO going free, you probably need to simplify your early gameplay

How will *RuneScape* continue to evolve?
RuneScape is the most updated game in the history of computer games. We thrive on change and we relish the chance to evolve and adapt to a new marketplace. *RuneScape* was, at its birth, a social tool, so the idea of modifying the product to work with other media types is certainly on the short-term list of challenges we want to overcome. With regards to the next gen, I'm not sure that anyone can answer that question or, indeed, identify what a next-gen MMO is. While several of the key features and ideas being bandied around right now in 'next-gen' games are interesting, I don't think they define a new generation – just that their implementation of traditional MMO ideas is polished. I have some ideas, for sure! I'm interested in the mobile market and would love to see a way of earning XP and developing my character while on the move, but I'm not sure that's next-gen either.

For more information on RuneScape, see www.runescape.com





Jagex has assured fans that it will continue to update, iterate and innovate on *RuneScape* in the coming years to deflect stiff free-to-play competition.



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